
WORLDS OF TOMORROW
March 1966
50¢
THE SUICIDE EXPRESS
A Thrilling Complete Science Fiction Novel
by Philip Jose Farmer
LIKE ANY WORLD OF GREE
by G. G. MacApp
MARCH
TOMORROW
1966
ROBERT S. RICHARDSON - SAM MOSKOWITZ - AND MANY OTHERS

WORLDS OF TOMORROW®

MARCH 1966
Vol. 3 No. 6
ISSUE 18

ALL NEW STORIES

Cover by MORROW suggested by THE SUICIDE EXPRESS

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WORLDS OF TOMORROW is published bi-monthly by GALAXY PUBLISHING CORP. Main Offices: 421 Hudson Street, New York, 10014. 50c per copy. Subscription (12 copies) $5.00 in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions. Elsewhere $6.00. Printed in the U.S.A. By The Guinn Co., Inc., N.Y. Title Reg. U.S. Pat Off.

WHY SPACE?

As this issue was in preparation one of the brightest comets of this century was approaching perihelion, and both tantalizing and disappointing a lot of amateur stargazers. If you were among the thousands who strained to catch a glimpse of it at sunrise, we hope you had better luck than we. (The trouble with observing difficult eastern-sky objects in the eastern United States is the Atlantic Ocean, which unfailingly throws a light haze just where you want to look. It's only in the past few months that we got our first "naked-eye" look at the planet Mercury at sunrise, although the thing is a brilliant first-magnitude object at maximum elongation. And even so we had to cheat by using field glasses.)

Discussing Comet Ikeya-Seki with Bob Richardson, whose article on the VJSE hypothesis of comet formation is in this issue, we began to wonder what would happen if a "sun-grazer" like Ikeya-Seki came a little closer — if in fact it plunged right into the sun. Heat, says Richardson: "If a comet of mass one-millionth that of Earth (a pretty big comet) fell into the sun from infinity it would generate 2.74 x 10^{29} calories. In one hour the sun's *total* radiations is 3.256 x 10^{29} calories. This would turn loose quite a bit of heat!"

Of course, Ikeya-Seki didn't collide, so we were spared what would have been a least a sudden and potentially dangerous burst of insolation. But we might not always be so lucky.

Which reminds us of one more argument we have advanced from time to time to convert people to support of our space program. It just might turn out to be a matter of simple self-defense . . . not defense against the Russians or the Chinese, but against the far more dangerous forces of nature. Suppose a somewhat larger comet plunged into the sun? Or suppose — what is far more likely, and in fact has happened from time to time in the past — an asteroid-sized object, instead of making a near-miss on Earth as some of them do, plunged right in? A good-sized one might make another Great Barringer Crater out of New York or London or Chicago; a really big one might well wipe out all life on the Earth.

But caught early enough in orbit, it would be comparatively easy to divert them . . . .

Long-shot? Sure it's a long shot. It might not be a very important reason for going into space.

On the other hand, it just might insure the survival of the human race!

— THE EDITOR

THE SUICIDE EXPRESS

by PHILIP JOSE FARMER

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

On the Riverworld every human being was born again and many died again . . . over and over!

I

BEFORE BOARDING

"I hate you, Hermann Goering!" The voice sprang out and then flashed away as if it were a gear tooth meshed with the cog of another man's dream and rotated into and then out of his dream.

Riding the crest of the hypnopompic state, Richard Francis Burton knew he was dreaming. But he was helpless to do anything about it. The voice of the intruder had gone.

Now the first dream returned.

He saw the first few moments of his awakening after his death on Earth in 1890 A.D. He had opened his eyes to find himself floating in the air and surrounded by millions, maybe billions, of sleeping men, women and children. He, and he alone, of all the hosts of human beings who had lived since the first apeman spoke and became truly human—he alone had awakened before resurrection.

Why? He had not known then why he had been singled out, and he did not know now. His dream furnished him no clue. What good was a dream without a flash of mantic truth? What was it trying to tell him?

"God alone knows," he said, groaning in his sleep and aware that he was groaning. "God alone knows why I awoke and glimpsed enough of pre-resurrection life—of the limbo between the first death and the second birth—to know that this life is not the result of super-natural powers but is the workings—however mysterious—of beings with a science far beyond that of my time."

Events were fuzzy and encapsulated. A lightning streak of himself in the unmeasurable chamber of floating bodies; another flash of the nameless custodians finding him and putting him back to sleep; then a jerky synopsis of the dream he had had just before the true resurrection on the banks of the river.

God—a beautiful old man in a beard and the clothes of a mid-Victorian gentleman of means and breeding—was poking him in the ribs with an iron cane and telling him that *he owed for his flesh.*

"What? What flesh?" said Burton, dimly aware that he was muttering in his sleep. He could not hear his words in the dream.

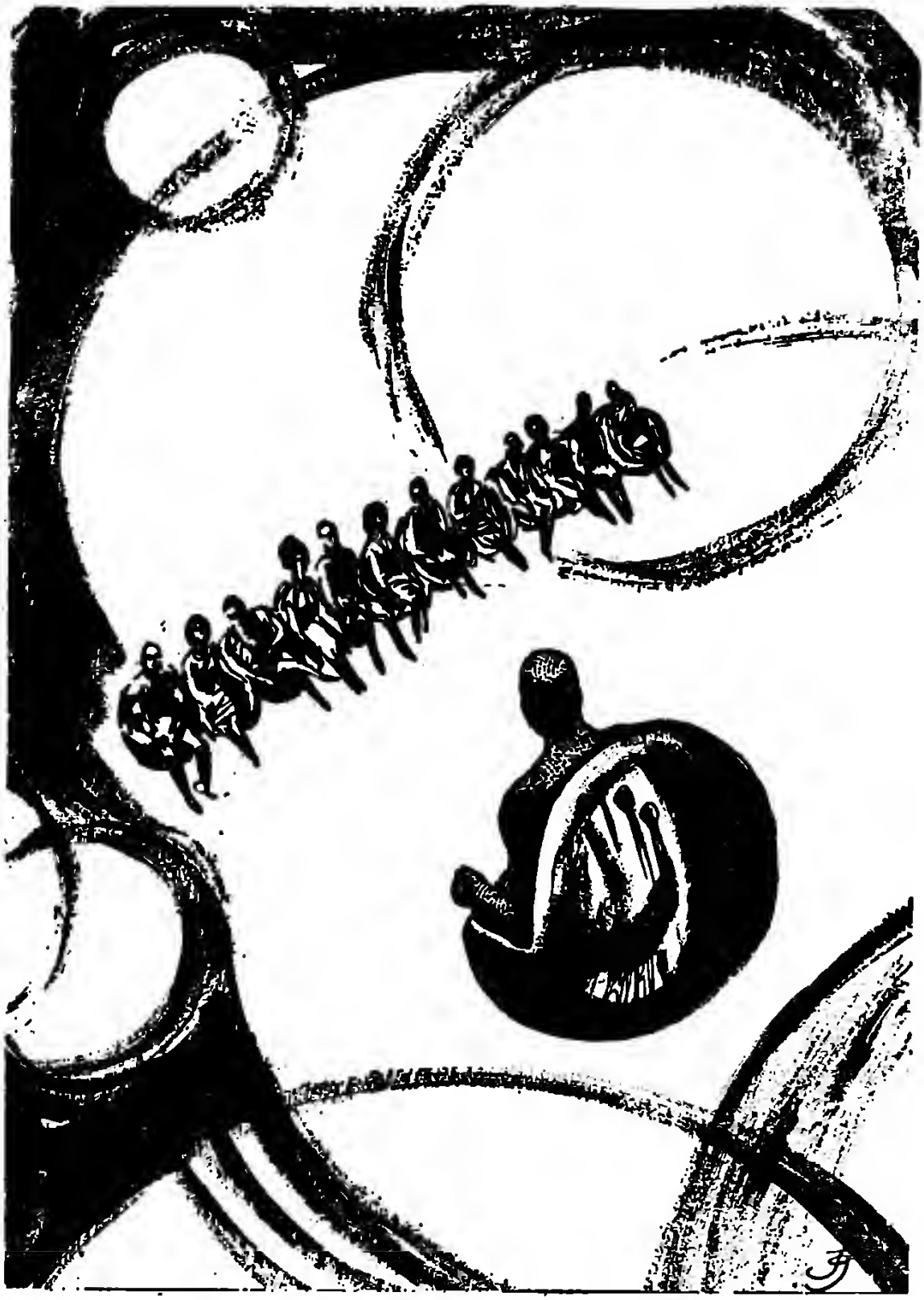
"Pay up!" God said. His face melted, then was recast into Burton's own features.

God had not answered in the first dream some five years before. He spoke now: "Make your resurrection worth my while, you fool! I have gone to great expense and even greater pains to give you, and all those other miserable and worthless wretches, a second chance."

"Second chance at what?" Burton replied. He felt frightened at what God might answer. He was much relieved when God the All-Father—only now did Burton see that one eye of Jahweh-Odin was gone; out of the empty socket glared the flames of hell—did not reply. He was gone—no, not gone but metamorphosed into a high gray tower, cylindrical and soaring out of gray mists with the roar of the sea coming up through the mists.

"The Grail!" He saw again the man who had told him of the Big Grail. This man had heard it from another man, who had heard of it from a woman, who had heard it from, and so forth. The Big Grail was one of the legends told by the billions who lived along the river—this river that coiled like a serpent around this planet from pole to pole, issued from the unreachable and plunged into the inaccessible.

A man, some said a subhuman, had managed to climb through the mountains to the North Pole. And he had seen the Big Grail, the Dark



Tower, the Misty Castle just before he had stumbled. Some said he was pushed. At any rate, he had fallen headlong and bellowing into the cold seas beneath the mists and died. And then the man, or subhuman, had awakened again along the river. Death was not forever here, although it had lost nothing of its sting.

He had told of his vision. And the story had traveled along the valley of the river faster than a boat could sail, and everybody seemed to have heard of it.

Thus the man now dreaming—Richard Francis Burton, the discoverer of Lake Tanganyika, the eternal pilgrim and wanderer — had longed to storm the ramparts of the Big Grail. He would unveil the secret of resurrection and of this planet, since he was convinced that the beings who had reshaped this world had also built that tower.

"Die, Hermann Goering! Die, and leave me in peace!" a man shouted in German.

Burton opened his eyes. He could see nothing except the pale sheen of the multitudinous and jampacked stars through the open window across the room of the hut.

His vision bent to the shape of the black things inside, and he saw Peter Frigate and Loghu sleeping on their mats by the opposite wall. He turned his head to see the white, blanket-sized towel under which Alice Liddell slept. The whiteness of her face was turned towards him, and the black cloud of her hair spilled out on the ground by her mat.

That same evening, the single-masted boat on which the four had been sailing down the river had put into a friendly shore. The little state of Sevieria was inhabited largely by 16th-century Englishmen, although its chief was an American who had lived in the late 18th and early 19th century. John Sevier, founder of the "lost state" of Franklin, which had later become Tennessee, had welcomed Burton and his party.

Sevier and his people did not believe in slavery and would not detain any guest longer than he desired. After permitting them to charge their grails and so feed themselves, Sevier had invited them to a party given by the state. It was the celebration of Resurrection Day; afterwards he had had them conducted to the guest hostelry.

Here Burton and the others had gone to bed. But Burton was always a light sleeper, and now he was an uneasy one. He had not been able to fight off wakefulness. The others began breathing deeply or snoring long before he had succumbed to weariness. And after an interminable dream, he had wakened on hearing the voice that had interlocked with his dreams.

Hermann Goering, Burton thought. He had last seen Goering during the revolt of the Israeli slaves against the German and his co-chief, Tullios Hostilios, once third king of ancient Rome. Burton himself had killed Goering, but Goering must be alive again somewhere along the river. Was the man groaning and shouting in the neighboring hut one who had also suffered be-

cause of Goering, either on Earth or in the rivervalley?

Burton threw off the black towel and rose swiftly but noiselessly. He secured a cloth around his loins with magnetic tabs, fastened a belt of human skin around his waist, and made sure the human-leather scabbard held the flint poignard. Carrying an assegai, a short length of hardwood tipped with a flint point, he left the hut.

The sky was moonless, but it cast a light brighter than the full moon of Earth had ever achieved. It was aflame with huge many-colored stars and pale sheets of cosmic gas, so crowded that it was impossible to determine constellations or skymarks. The brilliance was strong enough to read by, but on this world of scanty resources and limited technologies, there were no books or newspapers.

The hostelries were set back a mile and a half from the river and placed on one of the second row of hills that edged the riverplain. There were seven of the one-room, leaf-thatch-roofed, bamboo buildings. At a distance, under the enormous branches of the indestructible irontrees or under the giant pines or oaks, were other huts. A half-mile away, on top of a high hill, was a large circular stockade, colloquially termed the "Roundhouse." There the officials of Sevieria and a part of the army slept.

Across the plain, near the riveredge, were the grail-rocks, mushroom-shaped formations of granite. These were spaced every mile on both sides of the river. Three times a day, they discharged the enormous voltages that were converted by the so-called grails into food, liquor, tobacco and narcotics.

There were also high towers of bamboo placed every half-mile along the river shore. Torches flamed all night long on the platforms from which sentinels kept a lookout for invaders.

After scrutinizing the shadows under the trees, Burton walked a few steps to the hut from which the groans and shouts had come.

He pushed the grass curtain aside. The starlight fell through the open window on the face of the sleeper. Burton hissed in surprise. The light revealed the blondish hair and the broad features of a youth he recognized.

Burton moved slowly on bare feet. The sleeper groaned and threw one arm over his face and half-turned. Burton stopped until he was sure that the youth was not faking. Then he resumed his stealthy progress. He placed the assegai on the ground, drew his dagger, and gently thrust the point against the hollow of the throat. The arm flopped over; the eyes opened and stared into Burton's. Burton clamped his hand over the man's open mouth.

"Hermann Goering! Don't move or try to yell! I'll kill you!"

Goering's light-blue eyes looked dark in the shadows, but the paleness of his terror shone out. He quivered and started to sit up, then sank back as the flint dug into his skin.

"How long have you been here?" Burton said. He knew that Goering

had not been among the guests at Sevier's party.

"Who . . .?" Goering said in English. then his eyes opened even wider. "Richard Burton? Am I dreaming? Is that you?"

Burton could smell the dreamgum on Goering's breath and the sweat-soaked mat on which he lay. The German was much thinner than the last time he had seen him, when he was gorging himself with the food and liquor from the grails of his prisoners.

Goering said. "I don't know how long I've been here. What time is it?"

"About an hour until dawn, I'd say. It's the day after Resurrection Celebration."

"Then I've been here three days," Goering said. "Could I have a drink of water? My throat's dry as a sarcophagus."

"No wonder. You're a living sarcophagus — if you're addicted to dreamgum."

Burton stood up, gesturing with the assegai at a fired-clay pot on a little bamboo table nearby. "You can drink if you want to. But don't try anything."

Goering rose slowly and staggered to the table. "I'm too weak to give you a fight, even if I wanted to." He drank noisily from the pot and then picked up an apple from the table. Between bites, he said, "What're you doing here? I thought I was rid of you."

"You answer my question first," Burton said, "and be quick about it. You pose a problem that I don't like, you know."

II

Goering started chewing, stopped, stared, then said, "Why should I? I don't have any position of power here, and I couldn't do anything to you if I did. I'm just a guest here. Damned decent people, these; they haven't bothered me at all except to ask if I'm all right now and then. Though I don't know how long they'll let me stay without earning my keep."

"You haven't left the hut?" Burton said. "Then who charged your grail for you? How'd you get so much dreamgum?"

Goering smiled slyly. "I had a big collection from the last place I stayed; somewhere about a thousand miles up the river."

"Doubtless taken forcibly from some poor slaves," Burton said. "But if you were doing so well there, why did you leave?"

Goering began to weep. Tears ran down his face, and over his collarbones—he was naked—and down his chest, and his shoulders shook.

"I . . . I had to get out. I wasn't any good to the others. I was losing my hold over them — spending too much time drinking, smoking marijuana and chewing dreamgum. They said I was too soft on the slaves—and getting too soft myself. They would have killed me or, worse, made me a slave. So I sneaked out one night . . . took the boat, I got away all right and kept going until I put into here. I traded part of my supply to Sevier for two weeks' sanctuary. He agreed to let me alone, let

me wrestle with myself until my gum ran out."

Burton stared curiously at Goering. He certainly was not the powerful man that he had known.

"You knew what would happen if you took too much gum," he said. "Nightmares, hallucinations, delusions. Total mental and physical deterioration. You must have seen it happen to others."

"I was a morphine addict on Earth!" Goering cried. "I struggled with it, and I won out for a long time. Then, when things began to go badly for the Third Reich —and even worse for myself—when Hitler began frowning at me, I started taking drugs again!"

"But here, when I woke up to a new life, in a young body, when it looked as if I had an eternity of life and youth ahead of me, when there was no stern God in Heaven or Devil in Hell to stop me, I thought I could do exactly as I pleased and get away with it. I would become even greater than the Fuehrer! That little country in which you first found me was to be only the beginning! I could see my empire stretching for thousands of miles up and down the river, on both sides of the valley. I would have been the ruler of ten times the subjects that Hitler ever dreamed of!"

He began weeping again, then paused to take another drink of water, then put a piece of the dream-gum in his mouth. He chewed, his face becoming more relaxed and blissful with each second. Burton hastened to talk to him.

"Why did you take to the gum? Millions use it every day and manage to moderate the habit. But some can't stay away from abuse of it, and you seem to be one of these."

"I kept having nightmares of you plunging the spear into my belly. When I woke up, my belly would hurt as if a genuine flint had gone into my guts, not one of the stuff of dreams. So I'd take gum to remove the hurt and the humiliation suffered by having you kick my ambitions to smithereens. At first, the gum helped. I was great. I was master of the world, Hitler, Napoleon, Julius Caesar, Alexander, Genghis Khan rolled into one. I was even chief again of von Richthofen's Red Death Squadron; those were happy days, the happiest of my life in many ways. But the euphoria soon gave way to hideousness. I plunged into hell; I saw myself accusing myself and behind the accuser a million others. Not myself but the victims of that great and glorious hero, that obscene madman Hitler, whom I worshipped so and in whose names I committed so many crimes."

"You admit you were a criminal?" Burton said. "That's a story different than the one you used to give me. Then you said you were justified in all you did, and you were betrayed by the —"

He stopped, realizing that he had been sidetracked from his original purpose. "That you should be haunted with the specter of a conscience is rather incredible. But perhaps that explains what has puzzled the puritans—why liquor, to-

bacco, marijuana and dreamgum were offered in the grails along with food. At least, dreamgum seems to be a gift boobytrapped with danger to those who abuse it."

He stepped closer to Goering. The German's eyes were half-closed, and his jaw hung open.

"Earlier, I said you presented a problem. You know my identity. I am traveling under a pseudonym, with good reason. You remember Spruce, one of your slaves? After you were killed, he was revealed, quite by accident, as one of the Ethicals, the people who terraformed this planet into one huge rivervalley and who somehow resurrected all the dead of humanity. Goering, are you listening?"

Goering nodded.

"Spruce killed himself before we could get out of him all we wanted to know. Later, some of his compatriots came to our area and temporarily put everybody to sleep—probably with a gas—intending to take me away to wherever their headquarters are. But they missed me. I was off on a trading trip up the river. When I returned, I realized they were after me, and I've been running ever since. Goering, do you hear me?"

Burton slapped him savagely on his cheek. Goering said, "Ach!" and jumped back and held the side of his face. His eyes were open, and he was grimacing.

"I heard you!" he snarled. "It just didn't seem worthwhile to answer back. Nothing seemed worthwhile, nothing except floating away, far from . . ."

"Shut up and listen!" Burton said. "The Ethicals have men everywhere looking for me. I can't afford to have you alive, do you realize that? I can't trust you. Even if you were a friend, you couldn't be trusted. You're a gummer!"

Goering giggled, stepped up to Burton and tried to put his arms around Burton's neck. Burton pushed him back so hard that he staggered up against the table and only kept from falling by clutching its edges. Again he giggled.

"This is very amusing," he said. "The day I got here, a man asked me if I'd seen you. He described you in detail and gave your name. I told him I knew you well—too well, and that I hoped I'd never see you again, not unless I had you in my power, that is. He said I should notify him if I saw you again. He'd make it worth my while."

Burton wasted no time. He strode up to Goering and seized him with both hands. They were small and delicate for such a powerful man, but they could be like a crab's claws. Goering winced with pain and said, "What're you going to do, kill me again?"

"Not if you tell me the name of the man who asked you about me. Otherwise . . ."

"Go ahead and kill me!" Goering said. "So what? I'll wake up somewhere else, thousands of miles from here, far out of your reach."

Burton pointed at a bamboo box in a corner of the hut. Guessing that it held Goering's supply of gum, he said, "And you'd also wake up with-

out that! Where else could you get so much on such short notice?"

Goering said, "Damn you!" and tried to tear himself loose to get to the box.

"Tell me his name!" Burton said. "Or I'll take the gum and throw it in the river!"

"Agneau. Roger Agneau," Goering said swiftly. "He sleeps in a hut just outside the Roundhouse."

"I'll deal with you later," Burton said, chopped Goering on the side of the neck with the edge of his palm.

He had no sooner let the limp body down than he saw a man crouching outside the entrance to his hut. He withdrew from the curtain, but the stranger must have seen the curtains move out of the corner of his eye. He straightened up and was off like an arrow. Burton ran out after him; in a minute both were in the tall pines and oaks of the hills. His quarry disappeared in the waist-high, tough-fibered grass that grew only on the hills.

Burton slowed to a trot, caught sight of a patch of white—starlight on bare skin—and was off after the fellow. He hoped that the Ethical would not kill himself at once, because he had a plan for extracting information if he could knock him out at once. It involved hypnosis, at which Burton was an adept. But he would have to catch the Ethical first and very quickly. It was possible that the man had some sort of wireless imbedded in his body and was even now in communication with his compatriots—wherever they were. If so, they would come in their flying machines, and he would be lost.

For several minutes he thought he had lost his quarry and that the only thing to do now was to rouse Alice and the others and flee the area. Perhaps this time they should take to the mountains and hide there for a while.

But first he would go to Agneau's hut. There was little chance that Agneau would be there, but it was certainly worth the effort.

III

Burton arrived within sight of the hut just in time to glimpse the back of a man entering it. Burton circled to come up from the side where the darkness of hills and the trees scattered along the plain gave him some concealment. Crouching, he ran until he was at the door to the hut.

He heard a loud cry some distance behind him and whirled to see Goering staggering towards him. He was crying out in German to Agneau, warning him that Burton was just outside. In one hand he held a long spear which he brandished at the Englishman.

Burton turned and hurled himself against the flimsy bamboo-slat door. His shoulder drove into it and broke it from its wooden hinges. The door flew inward and struck Agneau, who had been standing just behind it. Burton, the door and Agneau fell to the floor with Agneau under the door.

Burton rolled off the door, rose, and jumped again with both bare feet on the wood. Agneau screamed and then became silent. Burton

heaved the door to one side to find his quarry unconscious and bleeding from the nose. Good! Now if the noise didn't bring the watch and if he could deal quickly enough with Goering, he could carry out his plan.

He looked up just in time to see the starlight on the long black object hurtling at him.

He threw himself to one side, and the spear plunged into the dirt floor with a thump. Its shaft vibrated like a rattlesnake preparing to strike.

Burton stepped into the doorway, estimated Goering's distance and charged his assegai. Its flint plunged into the belly of the German. Goering threw his hands up in the air, screamed, and fell on his side. Burton hoisted Agneau's limp body on his shoulder and carried him out of the hut.

By then there were shouts from the Roundhouse. Torches were flaring up; the sentinel on the nearest watchtower was bellowing. Goering was sitting on the ground, bent over, clutching the shaft close to the wound.

He looked gape-mouthed at Burton and said, "You did it again! You . . ."

He fell over on his face, the death rattle in his throat.

At that moment, Agneau returned to a frenzied consciousness. He twisted himself out of Burton's grip, rolled off his shoulder, fell to the ground. Unlike Goering, he made no noise. He had as much reason to be silent as Burton—more perhaps. Burton was so surprised that he was left standing with the fellow's loin-towel clutched in his hand. Burton went to throw it down but felt something stiff and square within the lining of the towel. He transferred the cloth to his left hand, yanked the assegai from the corpse and ran after Agneau.

The Ethical had launched one of the bamboo canoes beached along the shore. He paddled furiously out into the starlit waters, glancing frequently behind him. Burton raised the assegai behind his shoulder and hurled it. It was a short, thick-shafted weapon, designed for in-fighting and not as a javelin. But it flew straight and came down at the end of its trajectory in Agneau's back. The Ethical fell forward and at an angle and tipped the narrow craft over. The canoe turned upside down. Agneau did not reappear.

Burton grimaced with disappointment. He had wanted to capture Agneau alive, but he was damned if he would permit the Ethical to escape. There was a chance that Agneau had not contacted other Ethicals yet.

He turned back toward the guest huts. Drums were beating up and down along the shore, and people with burning torches were hastening toward the Roundhouse in answer to the alarm. Burton stopped a woman and asked if he could borrow her torch a moment. She handed it to him but spouted questions at him. He answered that he thought the Choctaws across the river were making a raid. She hurried off towards the assembly before the stockade.

Burton drove the pointed end of the torch into the soft dirt of the bank and examined the towel he had snatched from Agneau. On the inside, just above the hard square in the lining, was a seam sealed with two thin magnetic strips, easily opened. He took the object out of the lining and looked at it by the torchlight.

For a long time he squatted by the shifting light, unable to stop looking or to subdue an almost paralyzing astonishment. A photograph, in this world of no cameras, was unheard-of. But a photograph of *him* was even more incredible, as was the fact that the picture had not been taken on this world! It had to have been made on Earth, that Earth lost now in the welter of stars somewhere in the blazing sky and in God only knew how many thousands of years of time.

Impossibility piled on impossibility! But it was taken at a time and at a place when he knew for certain that no camera had fixed upon him and preserved his image. His mustachioes had been touched away to make him look more like the beardless man he now was. But the retoucher had not bothered to opaque the background nor his clothing. There he was, caught miraculously from the waist up and imprisoned in a flat piece of some material. Flat! When he turned the square, he saw his profile come into view. If he held it almost at right angles to the eye, he could get a three-quarters profile-view of himself.

"1848," he muttered to himself. "When I was a 27 year old subaltern in the East Indian Army. And those are the blue mountains of Goa. This must have been taken when I was convalescing there. But, my God, how? By whom? And how would the Ethicals manage to have it in their possession now?"

Agneau had evidently carried this photo as a mnemonic in his quest for Burton. Probably every one of his hunters had one just like it, concealed in his towel. Up and down the river they were looking for him; there might be thousands, perhaps tens of thousands. Who knew how many agents they had available or how desperately they wanted him or *why* they wanted him?

It had something to do with the fact that he had awakened in that pre-resurrection chamber. They were very much upset by this. Perhaps they were as mystified by him as he was by them. Whatever their reasons, they considered him to be a potential danger. He might find out why if he was taken by them. He also might not like the reason.

Whatever it was, he did not intend to be caught.

After replacing the photo in the towel, he turned to go back to the hut. And at that moment his gaze turned toward the top of the mountains—those unscalable heights that bounded the river valley on both sides.

He saw something flicker against a bright sheet of cosmic gas. It appeared for only the blink of an eyelid, then was gone.

A few seconds later it came out of nothing, was revealed as a hem-

ispherical and dark object, then disappeared again. This time it was lower, just above the top of the mountain range. If it appeared again, it would be hidden against the dark bulk of the mountains.

But a second flying craft showed itself briefly, reappeared at a lower elevation, and then was gone like the first.

Burton did not wonder about the flying machines. They were bringing the Ethicals. They would take him away, and the people of Sevieria would wonder what had made them fall asleep for an hour or so.

He did not have time to return to the hut and wake the others up. If he waited a moment longer, he would be trapped.

He turned and ran into the river and began swimming toward the other shore, a mile and a half away. But he had gone no more than forty yards when he felt the presence of some huge bulk above. He turned on his back to stare upwards. There was only the soft glare of the stars above. Then, out of the air, fifty feet above him, a disk with a diameter of about sixty feet cut out a section of the sky. It disappeared almost immediately, came into sight again only twenty feet above him.

So they had some means of seeing at a distance in the night and had spotted him in his flight.

"You jackals!" he shouted at them. "You'll not get me anyway!"

He upended and dived and swam straight downwards. The water became colder, and his eardrums began to hurt. Although his eyes were open, he could see nothing. Suddenly he was pushed by a wall of water, and he knew that the pressure came from displacement by a big object.

The craft had plunged down after him.

There was only one way out. They would have his dead body, but that would be all. He could escape them again, be alive somewhere on the river to outwit them again and strike back at them.

He opened his mouth and breathed in deeply through both his nose and mouth.

The water choked him. Only by a strong effort of will did he keep from closing his lips and trying to fight back against the death around him. He knew with his mind that he would live again, but the cells of his body did not know it. They were striving for life at this second, not in the rationalized future. And they forced from his water-choked throat a cry of despair.

IV

THE POLAR STATION

"Yaaaaaaaah!"

The cry raised him off the grass as if he had bounced up off a trampoline. Unlike the first time he had been resurrected, he was not weak and bewildered. He knew what to expect. He would wake on the grassy banks of the river near a grailstone. But he was not prepared for this war of giants in the center of which he found himself.

His first thought was to find a weapon. There was nothing at hand

except the grail that always appeared with a resurectee and the pile of towels of various sizes, colors and thickness. He took one step, seized the handle of the grail and waited. If he had to, he would use the grail as a club. It was light, but it was practically indestructible and very hard.

However, the monsters around him looked as if they could take a grail's battering all day and not feel a thing.

Most of them were at least seven feet tall, some were surely over eight; their massively muscled shoulders were over three feet broad. Their bodies were human, or nearly so, and their white skins were covered with long reddish or brownish hairs. They were not as hairy as a chimpanzee but more so than any man he had ever seen, and he had known some remarkably hirsute human beings.

But the faces gave them an unhuman and frightening aspect, especially since all were snarling with battle-rage. Below a low forehead was a bloom of bone that ran without indentation above the eyes and then continued around to form an O. Though the eyes were as large as his, they looked small compared to the broad face in which they were set. The cheekbones billowed out and then curved sharply inwards. The tremendous nose gave the giants the appearance of a proboscis monkey.

At another time, Burton might have been amused by them. Not now. The roars that tore out of their more-than-gorilla-sized chests were deep as a lion's, and the huge teeth would have made a Kodiak bear think twice before attacking. Their fists, large as his head, held clubs thick and long as wagonpoles or stone axes. They swung their weapons at each other, and when they struck flesh, bones broke with cracks loud as wood splitting. Sometimes the clubs broke, too.

Burton had a moment in which to look around. The light was weak. The sun had only half-risen above the peaks across the river. The air was far colder than any he had felt on this planet except during his defeated attempts to climb to the top of the perpendicular ranges.

Then one of the victors of a combat looked around for another enemy and saw him.

His eyes widened. For a second, he looked as startled as Burton had when he had first opened his eyes. Perhaps he had never seen such a creature as Burton before, any more than Burton had seen one like him. If so, he did not take long to get over his surprise. He bellowed, jumped over the mangled body of his foe and ran toward Burton, raising an axe that could have felled an aurochs.

Burton also ran, his grail in one hand. If he were to lose that, he might as well die anyway. Without it he would either starve or else have to eke out on fish and bamboo sprouts.

He almost made it. An opening appeared before him, and he sped between two titans, their arms around each other and each strain-

ing to throw over the other, and another who was backing away before the rain of blows delivered by the club of a fourth. Just as he was almost through, the two wrestlers toppled over on him.

He was going swiftly enough that he was not caught directly under them, but the flailing arm of one struck his left heel. So hard was the blow, it smashed his foot against the ground and stopped him instantly. He fell forward and began to scream. His foot must have been broken, and he had torn the muscles of his thighs.

Nevertheless he tried to rise and to hobble on to the river. Once in it, he could swim away, if he did not faint from the agony. He took two hops on his right foot, only to be seized from behind.

Up into the air he flew, whirling around, and was caught before he began his descent.

The titan was holding him with one hand at arm's length, the enormous and powerful fist clutched around Burton's chest. Burton could hardly breathe, his ribs threatened to cave in.

Despite all this, he had not dropped his grail. Now he raised it against the giant's shoulder.

Lightly, as if brushing off a fly, the giant tapped the metal container with his axe, and the grail was torn from Burton's grip.

The behemoth grinned and bent his arm to bring Burton in closer. Burton weighed one hundred and eighty pounds, but the arm did not quiver under the strain.

For a moment, Burton looked directly into the pale blue eyes sunk in the bony circles. The nose was hairless and lined here and there with many broken veins. The lips protruded because of the bulging prognathous jaws beneath — not, as he had first thought, because the lips were so thick.

Then the titan bellowed and lifted Burton up above his head. Burton hammered the huge arm with his fists, knowing that he made a vain gesture but unwilling to submit like a caught rabbit. Even as he did so, he noted, though not with the full attention of his mind, several things about this scene.

The sun had been just rising above the mountain peaks when he had first awakened. Although the time passed since he had jumped to his feet was only a few minutes, the sun should have cleared the peaks. It had not; it hung at exactly the same height as when he had first seen it.

Moreover, the upward slant of the valley permitted a view for at least four miles. The grailrock by him was the last one. Beyond it was only the plain and the river.

This was the end of the line — or the beginning of the river.

There was no time nor desire for him to appreciate what these meant. He merely noted these during the passage between pain, rage, and terror. Then, as the giant prepared to bring his axe around to splinter Burton's skull, he stiffened and shrieked. It was like being next to a locomotive whistle, deafening. The grip loosened, and Burton fell to the ground. For a moment, he passed out from the pain in his foot.

When he regained consciousness, he had to grind his teeth to keep from yelling again. He groaned and sat up, though not without a race of fire up his leg that made the feeble daylight grow almost black. The battle was roaring all around him, but he was in a little corner of inactivity. By him lay the tree-trunk-thick corpse of the titan who had been about to kill him. The back of his skull, which looked massive enough to resist a battering ram, was caved in.

Around the elephantine corpse crawled another casualty, on all fours. Seeing him, Burton forgot his pain for a moment. The horribly injured man was Hermann Goering.

Both of them had been resurrected at the same spot. Goering had suffered the same fate as he. There was no time to think about the implications of the coincidence. His pain began to come back. Moreover, Goering started to talk.

Not that he looked as if he had much talk left in him or much time to talk. Blood covered him. His right eye was gone. The corner of his mouth was ripped back to his ear. One of his hands was smashed flat. A rib was sticking through the skin. How he had managed to stay alive, let alone crawl, was beyond Burton's understanding.

"You . . . you!" Goering said hoarsely in German, and he collapsed. A fountain poured out of his mouth and over Burton's legs; his eyes glazed; he was dead.

Burton wondered if he would ever know what he had intended to say. Not that it really mattered. He had more vital things to think about.

About ten yards from him, two titans were standing with their backs to him. Both were breathing hard, apparently resting for a moment before they jumped back into the fight. Then one spoke to the other.

There was no doubt about it. The giant was not just uttering cries. He was using a language.

Burton did not understand it, but he knew it was speech. He did not need the modulated, distinctly syllabic reply of the other to confirm his recognition.

So these were not some type of prehistoric ape but a species of subhuman men. They must have been unknown to the 20th-century science of Earth, since his friend, Frigate, had described to him all the known fossils.

He lay down with his back against the fallen giant's Gothic ribs and brushed some of the long reddish sweaty hairs from his face. He fought nausea and the agony of his foot and the torn muscles of his thighs. If he made too much noise, he might attract those two, and they would finish the job. But what if they did? With his wounds, in a land of such monsters, what chance did he have of surviving?

Worse than his agony of foot, almost, was the thought that on his first trip on the suicide express he had reached his goal.

He had had only an estimated one chance in ten million of arriving at this area, and he might never have made it if he had drowned himself ten thousand times. Yet he had had

fantastically good fortune. It might never occur again. And he was to lose it and very soon.

The sun had not risen, but it was moving half-revealed along the tops of the mountains across the river. This was the place that he had speculated would exist; he had come here first shot. Now, as his eyesight failed and the pain lessened, he knew that he was dying. The sickness was born from more than the shattered bones in his foot. He must be bleeding inside.

He tried to rise once more. He would stand, if only on one foot, and shake his fist at the mocking fates and curse them. He would die with a curse on his lips; death might chill him but he would go with the fiery dawn.

V

THE SECOND STATION

The red wing of the dawn lightly touching his eyes.

He rose to his feet, knowing that his wounds would be healed and he would be whole again but not quite believing it. Near his was a grail and a pile of six neatly folded towels of various sizes, colors and thicknesses.

Twelve feet away, another man, also naked, was rising from the short bright-green grass that grew everywhere on the river plain. Burton hissed with shock, and his skin grew cold. The blondish hair, broad face and light-blue eyes were those of Hermann Goering.

The German looked as surprised as Burton. He spoke slowly, as if coming out of a deep sleep. "There's something very wrong here."

"Something foul indeed," Burton replied. He knew no more of the pattern of resurrection along the river than any other man. He had never witnessed any, but he had had them described to him by those who had seen them. At dawn, just after the sun topped the unclimbing mountains, a shimmering appeared in the air beside a grailstone. In the flicker of a bird's wing, the distortion solidified, and a naked man or woman or child had appeared from nowhere on the grass by the bank. Always the indispensable grail and the towels were by the "lazarus," having popped out of their own little shimmerings.

Along a conceivably ten to twenty million-mile long rivervalley in which an estimated 35 to 40 billion lived, a million could die per day. It was true that there were no disease (other than mental) but, though statistics were lacking, a million were probably killed every twenty-four hours by the myriads of wars between the thousand thousand little states, by crimes of passion, by suicides, by executions of criminals and by accidents. There was a steady and numerous traffic of those undergoing the "little resurrection," as it was called. A man died somewhere along the river, and he woke up the next day somewhere else, far from the place of his death.

But never had Burton heard of two dying in the same place and at the same time being resurrected together. The process of selection

of area for the new life was random — or so he had always thought.

One such occurrence could conceivably take place, although the probabilities were one in 20 million. But two such, one immediately after the other, was a miracle.

Burton did not believe in miracles. Nothing happened that could not be explained by physical principles — if you knew all the facts.

He did not know them, so he would not worry about the "coincidence" at the moment. The solution to another problem was more demanding. That was, what was he to do about Goering?

The man knew him and could identify him to any Ethicals searching for him.

Burton looked quickly around him and saw a number of men and women approaching (seemingly friendly). There was time for a few words with the German.

"Goering, I can kill you or myself. But I don't want to do either — at the moment, anyway. You know why you're dangerous to me. I shouldn't take a chance with you, you treacherous hyena. But there's something different about you, something I can't put my fingers on. But . . . "

Goering, a fellow notorious for his resilience, seemed to be coming out of his shock. He grinned slyly and said, "I do have you over the barrel, don't I?"

Seeing Burton's snarl, he hastily put up one hand and said, "But I swear to you I won't reveal your identity to anyone! Or do anything to hurt you. Look! Maybe we're not friends, but we at least know each other, and we're in a land of strangers. It's good to have one familiar face by your side. I know. I've suffered too long from loneliness, from desolation of the spirit. I thought I'd go mad. That's partly the reason I took to the dreamgum. Believe me, I won't betray you."

Burton did not believe him. He did think, however, that he could trust him for a while. Goering would want a potential ally, at least until he took the measure of the people in this area and knew what he could or could not do. Besides, Goering might have changed for the better.

No, Burton said to himself. No. There you go again. Verbal cynic though you are, you've always been too forgiving, too ready to overlook injury to yourself and to give your injurer another chance. Don't be a fool again, Burton.

Three days later, he was still uncertain about the man.

Burton had taken the name of Abdul ibn Harun, a 19th-century citizen of Cairo, Egypt. He had several reasons for adopting this guise. One was that he spoke excellent Arabic, knew the Cairo of that period, and had an excuse to cover his head with a towel wrapped as a turban. He hoped this would help disguise his appearance. Goering did not say a word to anybody to contradict the camouflage. Burton was fairly sure of this because he and Goering spent most of their time together. They were quartered in the same hut until they adjusted

to the local customs and went through their period of probation. Part of this was intensive military training. Since Burton had been one of the greatest swordsmen of the 19th century and also knew every inflection of fighting with weapons or with hands, he was welcomed as a recruit. In fact, he was promised that he would be an instructor when he learned the language well enough.

Goering got the respect of the locals almost as swiftly. Whatever his other faults, he did not lack courage. He was strong and proficient with arms, jovial, likeable when it suited his purpose, and was not far behind Burton in gaining fluency in the language. He was quick to gain and to use authority, as befitted the ex-Reichmarschal of Hitler's Germany.

This section of the western shore was populated largely by speakers of a language totally unknown even to Burton, a master linguist both on Earth and on the riverplanet. When he had learned enough to ask questions, he deduced that they must have lived somewhere in Central Europe of the Early Bronze Age. They had some curious customs, one of which was public sex. This was interesting enough to Burton, who had co-founded the Royal Anthropological Society in London in 1863 and who had seen some strange things during his explorations in the Old and the New World of Earth. He did not participate but neither was he horrified.

A custom he did adopt joyfully was that of stained whiskers. The males resented the fact that their face hair had been permanently removed by the resurrectors, just as they willynilly had had their prepuces cut off. They could do nothing about the latter outrage, but they could correct the former to a degree. This they did by smearing their upper lips and chins with a dark liquid made from finely ground charcoal, fish glue, oak tannin and several other ingredients. The more dedicated used the dye as a tattoo and underwent a painful and long-drawn-out pricking with a sharp bamboo needle.

Now Burton was doubly disguised; yet he had put himself at the mercy of the man who might betray him at the first opportunity. He had good reason for this in that he wanted to attract an Ethical but did not want the Ethical to be certain of his identity. If the Ethical thought his quarry was trying to disguise himself, he would not smell a trap.

Burton wanted to make sure that he could get away in time before being scooped up in the net. It was a dangerous game, like walking a tightrope over a pit of hungry wolves, but Burton wanted to play it. He would run only when it became absolutely necessary. The rest of the time, he would be the hunted hunting the hunter.

Yet the vision of the Dark Tower, or the Big Grail, was always on the horizon of every thought. Why play cat and mouse when he might be able to storm the very ramparts of the castle within which he presumed the Ethicals had headquar-

ters? Or, if stormed was not the correct description, steal into the tower, effect entrance as a mouse does into a house—or a castle. While the cats were looking elsewhere, the mouse would be sneaking into the Tower, and there the mouse might turn into a tiger.

At this thought, he laughed and earned curious stares from his two hutmates: Goering and the 17th-century Englishman, John Collop. His laugh was half-ridicule of himself at the tiger image. What made him think that he, one man, could do anything to hurt the planet-shapers, resurrectors of billions of dead, feeders and maintainers of those summoned back to life? He twisted his hands and knew that within them, and within the brain that guided them, could be the downfall of the Ethicals. What it was he harbored within himself, he did not know. But they feared him. If he could only find out why . . .

His laugh was only partly self-ridicule. The other half of him believed that he was a tiger among men. *As a man thinks, so is he,* he muttered.

Goering, who had started to wash his face and hands in a clay bowl on the bamboo table, jumped when Burton laughed. He turned and said, "You have a very peculiar laugh, my friend. Somewhat feminine for such a masculine man. It's like . . . like a thrown rock skipping over a lake of ice. Or like a jackal."

"I have something of the jackal and hyena in me." Burton replied. "So my detractors maintained—and they were right. But I am more than that."

He rose from his bed and began to exercise to work the sleep-rust from his muscles. In a few minutes, he would go with the others to a grailstone by the river bank and charge the grails with food and the necessary luxuries so generously provided by the Ethicals. Afterward there would be an hour of policing the area. Then drill, followed by instruction in the spear, the club, the sling, the obsidian-edged sword, the bow and arrow, the flint axe, and in fighting with bare hands and feet. An hour for rest and talk and lunch. Then an hour in a language class. A two-hour work-stint in helping build the ramparts that marked the boundaries of this little state. A half-hour rest, then the obligatory mile run to build stamina. Dinner from the grails, and the evening off except for those who had guard duty or other tasks.

Such a schedule and such activities were being duplicated in almost every one of the hundreds of thousands of tiny states up and down the river's length. Mankind almost everywhere was at war or preparing for it. The citizens must keep in shape and know how to fight to the best of their ability. The exercises also kept the citizens occupied. No matter how monotonous the martial life, it was better than sitting around wondering what to do for amusement. Freedom from worry about food, rent, bills, and the gnatlike chores and duties that had kept Earthmen busy and fretful was not all a blessing. There was the great battle against ennui, and the leaders of each state were occupied trying

to think up ways to keep their people busy.

It should haven been paradise in rivervalley, but it was war, war, war. Other things aside, however, war was, in this place, good. It gave savor to life, erased boredom. Man's greediness and aggressiveness had its worthwhile side.

After dinner, every man and woman was free to do what he wished, as long as he broke no local laws. He could barter the cigarettes and liquor provided by his grail or the fish he'd caught in the river for a better bow and arrows; shields; bowls and cups; tables and chairs; bamboo flutes; clay trumpets; human or fishskin drums; rare stones (which really were rare); necklaces made of the beautifully articulated and colored bones of the deep-river fish, of jade or of carved wood; obsidian mirrors; sandals and shoes; charcoal drawings; the infrequent and expensive bamboo paper; ink and fishbone pens; hats made from the long and tough-fibered hill-grass; bullroarers; little wagons on which to ride down the hillsides; harps made from wood with strings fashioned from the gut of the biggest of the deep-river fish, the "river dragon;" rings of oak for fingers and toes; clay statuettes; and other devices, useful or ornamental, in a number surprising when the poverty of material and technology was considered.

Later, of course, there was the love--making. Burton and his hutmates were denied this for the time being. Only when they had been accepted as full citizens would they be allowed to move into separate houses and live with a woman.

John Collop was a short and slight youth with long yellow hair, a narrow but pleasant face and large blue eyes with very long, upcurving, black eyelashes. In his first conversation with Burton, he had said, after introducing himself, "I was delivered from the darkness of my mother's womb—whose else?—into the light of the God of Earth in 1625. Far too quickly, I descended again into the womb of Mother Nature, confident in the hope of resurrection and not disappointed, as you see. Though I must confess that this afterlife is not that which the parsons led me to expect. But then, how should they know the truth, poor blind devils leading the blind?"

It was not long before Collop told him that he was a member of the Church of the Second Chance.

On hearing this, Burton's eyebrows rose. He had encountered this new religion at many places along the river. Burton, though a firm infidel, made it his business to investigate thoroughly every religion. Know a man's faith, and you knew at least half the man. Know his wife, and you knew the other half.

The Church had a few simple tenets, some based on fact, most on surmise and hope and wish. In this they differed from no religions born on Earth. But the Second Chancers had one advantage over any Terrestrial religion. They had no difficulty in proving that dead men could be raised — not only once but often.

"And why has mankind been given a Second Chance?" Collop said in his low, earnest voice. "Does he deserve it? No. With few exceptions, men are a mean, miserable, petty, vicious, narrow-minded, exceedingly egotistic, generally disgusting lot. Watching them, the gods — or God — should vomit. But in this divine spew is a clot of compassion, if you will pardon me for using such imagery. Man, however base, has a silver wire of the divine in him. It is no idle phrase that man was made in God's image. There is something worth saving in the worst of us, and out of this something a new man may be fashioned.

"Whoever has given us this new opportunity to save our souls knows this truth. We have been placed here in this rivervalley — on this alien planet under alien skies — to work out our salvation. What our time limit is, I do not know nor do the leaders of my Church even speculate. Perhaps it is forever, or it may be only a hundred years or a thousand. But we must make use of whatever time we do have, my friend."

"You're a lazarus also," Burton said, referring to Collop's translation, which had taken place two weeks before Burton's. "Weren't you sacrificed on the altar of Odin by Norse who clung to the old religion, even if this world isn't the Valhalla they were promised by their priests? Don't you think you wasted your time and breath by preaching to them? They believe in the same old gods, the only difference in their theology now being some adjustments they've made to conditions here. Just as you have clung to your old faith."

"The Norse have no explanations of their new surrounding," Collop said. "But I do. I have a reasonable explanation, one which the Norse will eventually come to accept, to believe in as fervently as I do. They killed me, but some more persuasive member of the Church will come along and talk to them before they stretch him out on the wooden lap of their wooden idol and stab him to the heart. If he does not talk them out of killing him, the next missionary after him will.

"It was true on Earth that the blood of the matyrs is the seed of the church. It is even truer here. For if you kill a man to shut his mouth, he pops up some plase elsewhere along the river. And a man who has been martyred a hundred thousand miles away comes along to replace the previous martyr. The Church will win out in the end. Then men will cease these useless, hate-generating wars and begin the real business, the only worthwhile business, that of gaining salvation."

"What you say about the martyrs is true about anyone with an idea," Burton said. "A wicked man who's killed also pops up to commit his evil elsewhere."

"Good will prevail; the truth always wins out," Collop replied.

"I don't know how restricted your mobility was on Earth or how long your life," Burton said, "but both must have been very limited to make you so blind. I know better."

Collop ignored his words. "The Church is not founded on faith alone. It has something very factual, very substantial, on which to base its teachings. Tell me, my friend, Abdul, have you ever heard of anybody being translated dead?"

"A paradox!" Burton cried. "What do you mean — resurrected dead?"

"There are at least three authenticated cases and four more of which the Church has heard but has not been able to validate. These are men and women who were killed at one place on the river and translated to another. Strangely, their bodies were recreated, but they were without the spark of life. Now, why was this?"

"I can't imagine!" Burton said. "You tell me. I listen, for you speak with authority!"

He *could* imagine, since he had heard the same story elsewhere. But he wanted to learn if Collop's story matched the others.

It was the same, even to the names of the dead lazari. The story was that men and women had been identified by those who had known them well on Earth. They were all saintly or near-saintly people; in fact, one of them had been canonized. The theory was that they had attained that state of sanctity which made it no longer necessary to go through the "purgatory" of the riverplanet. Their souls had gone on to . . . someplace . . . and left the excess baggage of their physical bodies behind.

Soon, so the Church said, more would reach this state. And their bodies would be left behind. Eventually, given enough time, the river-valley would become depopulated. All would have shed themselves of their viciousnesses and hates and would have become illuminated with the love of mankind and of God. Even the most depraved, those who seemed to be utterly lost, would be able to abandon their physical beings. All that was needed to attain this grace was love.

Burton sighed, laughed loudly, and said, *"Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme.* Another fairy tale to give men hope. The old religions have been discredited — although some refuse to face even that fact — so new ones must be invented."

"It makes sense," Collop said. "Do you have a better explanation of why we're here?"

"Perhaps. I can make up fairy tales, too."

As a matter of fact, Burton did have an explanation. However, he could not tell it to Collop.

For a while he was silent, thinking of those few and utterly terrifying and bewildering moments, among the few in his life when he had known fear. Unaccountably, he had awakened and had seen the pre-resurrection phase. And after the resurrection on the surface of this planet, he had made friends with a subhuman, Kazz. Because this fellow was able to see a little further into the violet range of the spectrum than Homo Sapiens, he had detected the marks on the foreheads of the risen. Seemingly, these invisible marks were some sort of numbering or cataloging symbols.

It was Kazz who had pointed out

to Burton a man who had no such symbol. That had resulted in the questioning of the man, Spruce. Under threat of torture, Spruce had told Burton something of the identity, history and purpose of his group, the Ethicals. Much of what he had said agreed with Collop's theology beliefs.

Spruce could have lied or have given a false picture with half-truths. Moreover, he had killed himself before he had explained about the "soul." Presumably, the "soul" had to be part of the total organization of resurrection. Otherwise, when the body had attained "salvation," and no longer lived, there would be nothing to carry on the essential part of a man. Since the post-Terrestrial life could be explained in physical terms, the "soul" must also be a physical entity, not to be dismissed with the term "supernatural" as it had been on Earth.

There was much that Burton did not know. But he had had a glimpse into the workings of this riverplanet that no other human being possessed.

With the little knowledge he did have, he planned to lever his way into more, to pry open the lid and crawl inside the sanctum. To do so, he would attain the Dark Tower. The only way to get there swiftly was to take what he was already mentally terming The Suicide Express. First he must be discovered by an Ethical. Then he must overpower the Ethical, render him unable to kill himself and somehow extricate more information from him.

Meanwhile, he continued to play the role of Abdul ibn Harun, translated and transplanted Egyptian physician of the 19th century, now a citizen of Bargawhwdzys. As such, he decided to join the Church of the Second Chance. He announced to Collop his disillusionment in Mahomet and his teachings, and so became Collop's first convert in this area.

"Then ye must swear not to take arms against any man nor to defend yourself physically, my dear friend," Collop said.

Burton, outraged, said that he would allow no man to strike at him and go unharmed.

"Tis not unnatural," Collop said gently. "Contrary to habit, yes. But a man may become something other than he has been, something better — if he has the strength of will and the desire."

Burton rapped out a violent no and stalked away. Collop shook his head sadly, but he continued to be as friendly as ever. Not without a sense of humor, he sometimes addressed Burton as his "five-minute convert," not meaning the time it took to bring him into the fold but the time it took Burton to leave the fold.

At this time, Collop got his second convert, Goering. The German who had nothing but sneers and jibes for Collop. Then he began chewing dreamgum, and the nightmares started.

For two nights he kept Collop and Burton awake with his groanings, his tossings, his screams. On the evening of the third day, he asked Collop if he would accept him into

the Church. However, he had to make a confession. Collop must understand what sort of person he had been, both on Earth and on this planet.

Collop heard out the mixture of self-abasement and self-aggrandizement. Then he said, "Friend, I care not what ye may have been. Only what you are and what you will be. I listened only because confession is good for the soul. I can see that ye are deeply troubled, that ye have suffered sorrow and grief for what ye have done, yet take some pleasure in what ye once were, a mighty figure among men. Much of what you told me I do not comprehend, because I know not much about your era. Nor does it matter. Only today and tomorrow need be our concern; each day will take care of itself."

It seemed to Burton that Collop did not care what Goering had been but that he did not believe his story of Earthly glory and infamy. There were so many phonies that genuine heroes, or villains, had been depreciated. Too many had taken advantage of the universality of youth, itself a disguise, and the lack of communication, to set themselves up as great ones. Thus, Burton had met three Jesus Christs, two Abrahams, four King Richard the Lion-Hearteds, six Attilas, a dozen Judases (only one of whom could speak Aramic), a George Washington, two Lord Byrons, three Jesse Jameses, any number of Napoleons, a General Custer (who spoke with a heavy Yorkshire accent), a Finn MacCool (who did not know ancient Irish), a Tchaka (who spoke the wrong Zulu dialect) and a number of others who might or might not have been what they claimed to be.

Whatever a man had been on Earth, he had to reestablish himself here. This was not easy, because conditions were radically altered. The greats and the importants of Terra were constantly being humiliated in their claims and denied a chance to prove their identities.

To Collop, the humiliation was a blessing. First, humiliation, then humility, he would have said. And then comes humanity as a matter of course.

Goering had been trapped in the Great Design — as Burton termed it — because it was his nature to overindulge, especially with drugs. Knowing that the dreamgum was uprooting the dark things in his personal abyss, was spewing them up into the light, that he was being torn apart, fragmented, he still continued to chew as much as he could. For a while, temporarily made healthful again with a new resurrection, he had been able to deny the call of the drug. But a few weeks after his arrival in this area he had succumbed, and now the night was ripped apart with his shrieks of "Hermann Goering, I hate you!"

"If this continues," Burton said to Collop, "he will go mad. Or he will kill himself again, or force someone to kill him, so that he can get away from himself. But the suicide will be useless, and it's all to do over again. Tell me truly, now, is this not hell?"

"Purgatory, rather," Collop said "Purgatory is hell with hope."

VIII

Two months passed. Burton marked the days off on a pine stick notched with a flint knife. The 14th day of the seventh month of 5 A.R., the fifth year after the resurrection. Burton tried to keep a calendar, for he was, among many other things, a chronicler. But it was difficult. Time did not mean much on the river. The planet had a polar axis that was always at ninety degrees to the ecliptic. There was no change of seasons, and the stars jostled each other and made identification of individual luminaries or of constellations impossible. So many and so bright were they that even the noonday sun at its zenith could not entirely dim the greatest of them. Like ghosts reluctant to retreat before daylight, they hovered in the burning air.

Nevertheless, man needs time as a fish needs water. If he does not have it, he will invent it; so to Burton it was July 13 of 5 A.R.

But Collop, like many, reckoned time as having continued from the year of his Terrestrial death. To him, it was 1667 A.D. He did not believe that his sweet Jesus had been discredited. Rather, this river was the River Jordan; this valley, the vale beyond the shadow of death. He admitted that the afterlife was not that which he had expected. Yet it was, in many respects, a far more glorious place. It was evidence of the all-encompassing love of God for his creation. He had given man, altogether undeserving of such a gift, another chance. If this world was not the New Jerusalem, it was a place prepared for its building. Here the bricks, which were the love of God; the mortar, love for man, must be fashioned in this kiln and this mill: the planet of the river of the valley.

Burton poohpoohed the concept, but he could not help loving the little man. Collop was genuine; he was not stoking the furnace of his sweetness with leaves from a book or pages from a theology. He did not operate under forced draft. He burned with a flame that fed on his own being, and this being was love. Love even for the unlovable, the rarest and most difficult species of love.

He told Burton something of his Terrestrial life. He had been a doctor, a farmer, a liberal with unshaken faith in his religion yet full of questions about his faith and the society of his time. He had written a plea for religious tolerance which had aroused both praise and damnation in his time. And he had been a poet, well-known for a short time, then forgotten.

> Lord, let the faithless see
> Miracles ceased, revive in me.
> The leper cleansed, blind healed,
> dead raised by thee.

"My lines may have died, but their truth has not," he said to Burton. He waved a hand to indicate the hills, the river, the mountains, the people, "As you may see if you open your eyes and do not persist in this stubborn myth of yours that this is the handiwork of men like us."

He continued, "Or grant your pre-

mise. It still remains that these Ethicals are but doing the work of their Creator."

"I like better those other lines of yours," Burton said.

> Dull soul aspire;
> Thou art not the earth. Mount higher!
> Heaven gave the spark;
> to it return the fire.

Collop was pleased, not knowing that Burton was thinking of them in a different sense than that intended by the poet. "Return the fire." That meant somehow finding the Dark Tower, somehow getting into it, discovering the secrets of the Ethicals, and turning their devices against them, if possible. He did not feel gratitude because they had given him a second life. Instead, he was outraged that they should do this without his leave. If they wanted his thanks, why did they not tell him why they had given him another chance? What reason did they have for keeping their motives in the dark? He would find out why. The spark they had restored in him would turn into a raging fire to burn them.

He cursed the fate that had propelled him to a place so near the source of the river, hence so close to the Tower, and in a few minutes had carried him away again, back to some place in the middle of the river, millions of miles away from his goal. Yet, if he had been there once, he could get there again. Not by taking a boat, since the journey would consume at least forty years and probably more. He could count on being captured and enslaved a thousand times over. Escaping from them would add many more years to the trip. And if he were killed along the way, he might find himself raised again far from his goal and have to start all over again.

On the other hand, given the seemingly random selection of resurrection, he could find himself once more near the river's mouth. It was this thought that determined him to board the Suicide Express once more. However, even though he knew that his death would be only temporary, he found it difficult to take the necessary step. His mind told him that death was the only ticket, but his body rebelled. The cells' fierce insistence on survival overcame his will.

For a while he rationalized that he was interested in studying the customs and language of the prehistorics among whom he was living. Then honesty triumphed, and he knew he was only looking for excuses to put off the Grim Moment. Despite this, he did not act.

Burton, Collop and Goering were moved out of their bachelor barracks to take up the normal life of citizens. Each took up residence in a hut, and within a week had found a woman to live with them. Collop's Church did not require celibacy. A member could take an oath of chastity if he wished to. But the Church reasoned that men and women had been resurrected in bodies that retained the full sex of the original. (Or, if lacking on Earth, supplied here.) Women did not bear children any more; something had

been subtracted from them or from the men or from both. Nevertheless, it was evident that the makers of resurrection had meant for sex to be used. It was well known, though still denied by some, that sex had other functions than reproduction. So go ahead, youths, and roll in the grass.

Another result of the inexorable logic of the Church (which, by the way, decried reason as being untrustworthy) was that any form of love was allowed, as long as it was voluntary and did not involve cruelty or force. Exploitation of children was forbidden. This was a problem that, given time, would cease to exist. In a few years all children would be adults.

Collop refused to have a hutmate solely to relieve his sexual tensions. He insisted on a woman whom he loved. Burton jibed at him for this, saying that it was a prerequisite easily—therefore cheaply—fulfilled. Collop loved all humanity; hence, he should theoretically take the first woman who would say yes to him.

"As a matter of fact, my friend," Collop said, "that is exactly what happened."

"It's only a coincidence that she's beautiful, passionate and intelligent?" Burton said.

"Though I strive to be more than human, rather, to become a complete human, I am all-too-human," Collop replied. He smiled. "Would you have me deliberately martyr myself by choosing an ugly shrew?"

"I'd think you more of a fool than I do even now," Burton said. "As for me, all I require in a woman is beauty and affection. I don't care a whit about her brains. And I prefer blondes. There's a chord within me that responds to the fingers of a golden-haired woman."

Goering took into his hut a Valkyrie, tall, great-busted, wide-shouldered, an 18th-century Swede. Burton wondered if she was a surrogate for Goering's first wife, the sister-in-law of the Swedish explorer Count von Rosen. Goering admitted that she not only looked like his Karin but even had a voice similar to hers. He seemed to be very happy with her and she with him.

IX

Then, one night, during the invariable early-morning rain, Burton was ripped from a deep sleep.

He thought he had heard a scream, but all he could hear now was the explosion of thunder and the crack of nearby lightning. He closed his eyes, only to be jerked upright. A woman had screamed in a nearby hut.

He jumped up, shoved aside the bamboo-slat door, and stuck his head outside. The cold rain hit him in the face. All was dark except for the mountains in the west, lit up by flashes of lightning. Then a bolt struck so close that he was deafened and dazzled. However, he did catch a glimpse of two ghostly white figures just outside Goering's hut. The German had his hands locked around the throat of his mate, who was holding onto his wrists and trying to push him away.

Burton ran out into the rain, slipped on the wet grass and fell. Just as he arose, another flash showed the woman on her knees, bending backward, and Goering's distorted face. At the same time, Collop, wrapping a towel around his waist, came out of his hut. Burton got to his feet and, still silent, ran towards Goering. When he reached the hut, he saw that Goering was gone. He knelt by Karla, felt her heart, and could detect no beat. Another glare of lightning showed him her face, mouth hanging open, eyes bulging.

He rose and shouted, "Goering! Where are you?"

Something struck the back of his head. He fell on his face.

Stunned, he managed to get to his hands and knees, only to be knocked flat again by another heavy blow. Half-conscious, he nevertheless rolled over on his back and raised his legs and hands to defend himself. Lightning revealed Goering standing above him with club in one hand. His face was that of a madman's.

Darkness sliced off the lightning. Something white and blurred leaped upon Goering out of the darkness. The two pale bodies went down onto the grass beside Burton and rolled over and over. They screeched like two tomcats, and another flash showed them clawing at each other like cats. Collop had rescued him.

Burton staggered to his feet and lurched towards them but was knocked down by Collop's body, hurled by Goering. Again Burton got up. Collop bounded to his feet and charged Goering. There was a loud crack, and Collop crumpled. Burton tried to run towards Goering. His legs refused to answer his demands; they took him off at an angle, away from his point of attack. Then another blast of light and noise showed Goering, as if caught in a photograph, suspended in the act of swinging the club at Burton.

Burton felt his arm go numb as it received the impact of the club. Now not only his legs but his left arm disobeyed him. Nevertheless he balled his right hand and tried to swing at Goering. There was another crack; his ribs felt as if they had become unhinged and were driven inwards into his lung. His breath was knocked out of him, and once again he was on the cold wet grass.

Something fell by his side. Despite his agony, he reached out for it. The club was in his hand; Goering must have dropped it. Shuddering with each painful breath, he got to one knee. Where was the madman? Two shadows danced and blurred, merged and half-separated. The hut! His eyes were crossed. He wondered if he had a concussion of the brain, then forgot it as he saw Goering dimly in the illumination of a distant streak of lightning. Two Goerings, rather. One seemed to accompany the other; the one on the left had his feet on the ground; the right one was treading on air.

Both had their hands held high up into the rain, as if they were trying to wash them. And when the two turned and came toward him, he understood that that was what they were trying to do. They were

shouting in German (with a single voice), "Take the blood off my hands! Oh, God, wash it off!"

Burton stumbled towards Goering, his club held high. Burton meant to knock him out, but Goering suddenly turned and ran away. Burton followed him as best he could, down the hill, up another one, and then out onto the flat plain. The rains stopped, the thunder and lightning died, and within five minutes the clouds, as always, had cleared away. The stars resumed their interrupted reign; their light gleamed on Goering's white skin.

Like a phantom he flitted ahead of his pursuer, seemingly bent upon getting to the river. Burton kept after him, although he wondered why he was doing so. His legs had regained most of their strength, and his vision was one. Presently, he came upon his quarry.

Goering was squatting by the river and staring intently at the star-fractured waves. Burton said, "Are you all right now?"

Goering was startled. He began to rise, then changed his mind. Groaning, he put his head down on his knees.

"I knew what I was doing, but I didn't know why," he said dully. "Karla was telling me she was moving out in the morning, said she couldn't sleep with all the noise I made. Moreover, I was acting strangely. I begged her to stay; I told her I loved her very much, I'd die if she deserted me. She said she was fond of me, had been, rather, but she didn't love me. Suddenly, it seemed that if I wanted to keep her, I'd have to kill her. She ran screaming out of the hut. You know the rest."

"I intended to kill you," Burton said. "But I've cooled off; I can see you're no more responsible than a madman. The people here won't accept that excuse, though. You know what they'll do to you; hang you upside down by your ankles and let you hang until you die."

Goering cried, "I don't understand it! What's happening to me? Those nightmares! Believe me, Burton, if I've sinned, I've paid! But I can't stop paying! My nights are hell, and soon my days will become hell, too! Then I'll have only one way to get peace! I'll kill myself! But it won't do any good! There'll be a few days of rest—then hell again!"

"Stay away from the dreamgum," Burton said. "You'll have to sweat it out. You can do it. You told me you overcame the morphine habit on Earth."

Goering stood up and faced Burton. "That's just it! I haven't touched the gum since I came here!"

Burton was surprised. He said, "What? But I'll swear."

"You assumed I was using the stuff because of the way I was acting! No, I have not had a bit of the gum! But it doesn't make any difference!"

Despite his abhorrence of Goering, Burton felt pity. He said, "You've opened the pandora of yourself, and it looks as if you'll not be able to shut the lid. I don't know how this is going to end, but I

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wouldn't want to be in your mind. Not that you don't deserve this."

Goering shook himself. It was not fear, however, but the physical manifestation of mental control. In a quiet and determined voice, he said, "I'll defeat them."

"You mean you'll conquer yourself," Burton said. He turned to go but halted for a last word. "What are you going to do?"

Goering gestured at the river. "Drown myself. I'll get a fresh start. Maybe I'll be better equipped the next place. And I certainly don't want to be trussed up like a chicken in a butcher shop window."

"Au revoir, then," Burton said. "And good luck."

"Thank you. You know, you're not a bad sort. Just one word of advice."

"What's that?"

"You'd better stay away from the dreamgum yourself. So far, you've been lucky. But one of these days, it'll take hold of you as it did me. Your devils won't be mine, but they'll be just as monstrous and terrifying."

"Nonsense! I've nothing to hide from myself!" Burton said, and he laughed loudly. "I've chewed enough of the stuff to know."

He walked away, but he was thinking of the warning. He had used the gum only twice in his life on riverplanet; both times had resulted in behavior which had made him swear never to touch the gum again. But then the effects had been externalized; there had been no explosions from the inferno of his unconscious, no hords of demons galloping out at night to torment him.

On the way back to the hills, he looked behind him once. The dim white figure of Goering was slowly sinking into the black-and-silver waters of the river. Burton saluted, since he was not one to resist the dramatic gesture. Afterward he forgot Goering. The pain in the back of his head, temporarily subdued, came back sharper than before. His knees turned to water, and, only a few yards from his hut, he had to sit down.

He must have become unconscious then, or half-conscious since he had no memory of being dragged along on the grass. When his wits cleared, he found himself lying on a bamboo bed inside a hut.

It was dark with the only illumination the starlight filtering in through tree branches outside the square of window. He turned his head and saw the shadowy and pale-white bulk of a man squatting by him. The features were too indistinct for Burton to distinguish them. Moreover, the man was holding a device before his eyes, the gleaming end which was pointed at Burton

X

As soon as Burton turned his head, the man put the device down. He spoke in English. "It's taken me a long time to find you, Richard Burton."

Burton groped around on the floor for a weapon with his left hand, which was hidden from the man's view. His fingers touched nothing but dirt. He said, "Now

you've found me, you damn Ethical, what do you intend doing with me?"

The man shifted slightly and he chuckled. "Nothing." He paused, then said, "I am not one of Them." He laughed again when Burton gasped. "That's not quite true. I am with Them, but I am not *of* Them."

He picked up the device which he had been aiming at Burton.

"This tells me that you have a fractured skull and a concussion of the brain. You must be very tough, because you should be dead, judging by the extent of the injury. But you may pull out of it, if you take it easy. Unfortunately, you don't have time to convalesce. The others know you're in this area, give or take thirty miles. In a day or so they'll have you pinpointed."

Burton tried to sit up and found that his bones had become soft as taffy in the sun and a bayonet was prying open the back of his skull. Groaning, he lay back down.

"Who are you and what's your business?"

"I can't tell you my name. If—or much more likely when—they catch you, they'll thread out your memory and run it off backwards to the time you woke up in the pre-resurrection bubble. They won't find out what made you wake before your time. But they will know about this conversation. They'll even be able to see me but only as you see me, a pale shadow with no features. They'll hear my voice too, but they won't recognize it. I'm using a transmuter.

"They will, however, be horrified. What they have slowly and reluctantly been suspecting will all of a sudden be revealed as the truth. They have a traitor in their midst."

"I wish I knew what you were talking about," Burton said.

The man said, "I'll tell you this much. You have been told a monstrous lie about the purpose of the resurrection. What Spruce told you, and what that Ethical creation, the Church of the Second Chance, teaches—are lies! All lies! The truth is that you human beings have been given life again only to participate in a scientific experiment. The Ethicals—a misnomer if there ever was one—have reshaped this planet into one rivervalley, built the grailstones, and brought all of you back from the dead for one purpose. To record your history and customs. And, as a secondary matter, to observe your reactions to resurrection and to the mixing of different peoples of different eras. That is all it is: a science project. And when you have served your purpose, back into the dust you go!

"This story about giving all of you another chance at eternal life and salvation because it is their ethical duty—lies! Actually, my people do not believe that you are worth saving. They do not think you have 'souls'!"

Burton was silent for a while. The fellow was certainly sincere. Or, if not sincere, he was very emotionally involved, since he was breathing so heavily.

Finally Burton spoke. "I can't see anybody going to all this ex-

pense and labor just to run a scientific experiment or to make historical recordings."

"Time hangs heavy on the hands of immortals. You would be surprised what we do to make eternity interesting. Furthermore, given all time, we can take our time, and we do not let even the most staggering projects dismay us. After the last terrestrial died, the job of setting up the resurrection took several thousands of years, even though the final phase took only one day."

Burton said, "And you? *What* are you doing? And *why* are you doing whatever you're doing?"

"I am the only true Ethical in the whole monstrous race! I do not like toying around with you as if you were puppets, or mere objects to be observed, animals in a laboratory! After all, primitive and vicious though you be, you are sentients! You are, in a sense, as . . . as . . ."

The shadowy speaker waved a shadowy hand as if trying to grasp a word out of the darkness. He continued, "I'll have to use your term for yourselves. You're as *human* as we. Just as the subhumans who first used language were as human as you. And you are our forefathers. For all I know, I may be your direct descendant. My whole people could be descended from you."

"I doubt it," Burton said. "I had no children—that I know of, anyway."

He had many questions, and he began to ask them. But the man was paying no attention. He was holding the device to his forehead. Suddenly, he withdrew it and interrupted Burton in the middle of a sentence. "I've been . . . you don't have a word for it . . . let's say . . . *listening*. They've detected my . . . *wathan* . . . I think you'd call it an aura. They don't know whose *wathan*, just that it's an Ethical's. But they'll be zeroing in within the next five minutes. I have to go."

The pale figure stood up. "You have to go, too."

"Where are you taking me?" Burton said.

"I'm not. You must die; they must find only your corpse. I can't take you with me; it's impossible. But if you die here, they'll lose you again. And we'll meet again. Then . . .!"

"Wait!" Burton said. "I don't understand. Why can't they locate me? They built the resurrection machinery. Don't they know where my particular resurrector is?"

The man chuckled again. "No. Their only recordings of men on Earth were visual, not audible. And the location of the resurectees in the pre-resurrection bubble was random, since they had planned to scatter you humans along the river in a rough chronological sequence but with a certain amount of mixing. They intend to get down to the individual basis later. Of course, they had no notion then that I would be opposing them. Or that I would select certain of their subjects to aid me in defeating the Plan. So they do not know where you, or the others, will next pop up.

"Now, you may be wondering why I can't set your resurrector so that you'll be translated near your goal,

the headwaters. The fact is that I did set yours so that the first time you died, you'd be at the very first grailstone. But you didn't make it; so I presume the Titanthrops killed you. That was unfortunate, since I no longer dare to go near the bubble until I have an excuse. It is forbidden for any but those authorized to enter the pre-resurrection bubble. They're suspicious; they suspect tampering. So it is up to you, and to chance, to get back to the north polar region.

"As for the others, I never had an opportunity to set their resurrectors. They have to go by the laws of probabilities, too. Which, worse luck, are about twenty million to one."

"Others?" Burton said. "Others? But why did you choose us?"

"You have the right aura. So did the others. Believe me, I know what I'm doing; I chose well."

"But you intimated that you woke me up ahead of time . . . in the pre-resurrection bubble, for a purpose. What did it accomplish?"

"It was the only thing that would convince you that the resurrection was not a supernatural event. And it started you on the track of the Ethicals. Am I right? Of course I am. Here!"

He handed Burton a tiny capsule. "Swallow this. You will be dead instantly and out of their reach—for a while. And your brain cells will be so ruptured they'll not be able to read them. Hurry! I *must* go!"

"What if I don't take it?" Burton said. "What if I allow them to capture me now?"

"You don't have the aura for it," the man said.

Almost Burton decided not to take the capsule. Why should he allow this arrogant fellow to order him around?

Then he considered that he should not bite off his nose to spite his face. As it was, he had the choice of playing along with this unknown and somewhat sinister man, or of falling into the hands of the others.

"All right," he said. "But why don't you kill me? Why make me do the job?"

The man laughed and said, "There are certain rules in this game, rules which I don't have time to explain. But you're intelligent, you'll figure out most of them for yourself. One is that we *are* Ethicals. We can give life, but we can't directly take life. It is not unthinkable for us or beyond our ability. Just very difficult."

Abruptly, the man was gone. Burton did not hesitate. He swallowed the capsule. There was a blinding flash . . .

XI

THE THIRD STATION

And light full in his eyes, from the just risen sun. He had time for one quick look around, saw his grail, his pile of neatly folded towels, a second grail and cubes of towels—and Herman Goering.

Then Burton and the German were seized by small dark men with large heads and bandy legs. These

carried spears and flint-headed axes. They wore towels but only as capes secured around their thick short necks. Strips of leather, undoubtedly human skin, ran across their disproportionately large foreheads and around their heads to bind their long, coarse black hair. They looked semi-Mongolian and spoke a tongue unknown to him.

An empty grail was placed upside down over his head; his hands were tied behind him with a leather thong. Blind and helpless, stone-tipped spears digging into his back, he was urged across the plain. Somewhere near, drums thundered, and female voices wailed a chant.

He had walked three hundred paces when he was halted. The drums quit beating, and the women stopped their singsong. He could hear nothing except the blood beating in his ears. What the hell was going on? Was he part of a religious ceremony which required that the victim be blinded? Why not? There had been many cultures on Earth which did not want the ritually slain to view those who shed his blood. The dead man's ghost might want to take revenge on his killers.

But these people must know by now that there were no such things as ghosts. Or did they regard *lazari* as just that, as ghosts that could be dispatched back to their land of origin by simply killing them again?

Goering! He, too, had been translated here. At the same grailstone. The first time could have been coincidence, although the probabilities against it were high. But thrice in succession? No, it was . . .

The first blow drove the side of the grail against his head, made him half-unconscious, sent a vast ringing through him and sparks of light before his eyes, and knocked him to his knees. He never felt the second blow, and so awoke once more in another place—

XII

THE FOURTH STATION

And with him was Hermann Goering.

"You and I must be twin souls," Goering said. "We seem to be yoked together by Whoever is responsible for all this."

"The ox and the ass plow together," Burton said, leaving it to the German to decide which he was. Then the two were busy introducing themselves, or attempting to do so, to the people among whom they had arrived. These, as he later found out, were Sumerians of the Old or Classical period; that is, they had lived in Mesopotamia between 2500 and 2300 B.C. The men shaved their heads (no easy custom with flint razors), and the women were bare to the waist. As a group, they had a tendency to short squat bodies, popeyes and (to Burton) ugly faces.

But if the index of beauty was not high among them, the pre-Columbian Samoans who made up ten per cent of the population were more than attractive. And, of course, there was the ubiquitous one per cent of people from anywhere and everyplace, 20th-centurions being the most numerous. This was understandable.

since the total number of these on Earth had constituted a fourth of humanity. Burton had no scientific statistical data, of course, but his travels had convinced him that the 20th-centurions had been deliberately scattered along the river in a proportion even greater than was to be expected. This was another facet of the riverworld setup which he did not understand. What did the Ethicals intend to gain by this dissemination?

There were too many questions. He needed time to think, and he could not get it if he spent himself with one trip after another on the Suicide Express. This area, unlike most of the others he would visit, offered some peace and quiet for analysis. So he would stay here a while.

And then there was Hermann Goering. Burton wanted to observe his strange form of pilgrim's progress. One of the many things that he had not been able to ask the Mysterious Stranger (Burton tended to think in capitals) was about the dreamgum. Where did it fit into the picture? Another part of the Great Experiment?

Unfortunately Goering did not last long.

The first night he began screaming. He burst out of his hut and ran towards the river, stopping now and then to strike out at the air or to grapple with invisible beings and roll back and forth on the grass. Burton followed him as far as the river's edge. Here Goering prepared to launch himself out into the water, probably to drown himself. But he froze for a moment, began shuddering, and then toppled over, stiff as a statue. His eyes were open, but they saw nothing outside him. All vision was turned inwards. What horrors he was witnessing could not be determined, since he was unable to speak.

His lips writhed soundlessly and did not stop during the ten days that he lived. Efforts to feed him were useless. His jaws were locked tightly. He shrank before Burton's eyes, the flesh evaporating, the skin falling in and the bones beneath resolving into the skeleton. One morning, he went into convulsions, then sat up and screamed. A moment later he was dead.

Curious, Burton did an autopsy on him with the flint knives and obsidian saws available. Goering's distended bladder had burst and poured urine into his body.

Burton proceeded to pull Goering's teeth out before burying him. Teeth were trade items, since they could be strung on a fishgut or a tendon as much-desired necklaces. Goering's scalp also came off. The Sumerians had picked up the custom of taking scalps from their enemies, the 17th-century Shawnee across the river. They had added the civilized embellishment of sewing scalps together to make capes, skirts, and even curtains. A scalp was not worth as much as teeth in the trade mart, but it was worth something.

It was while digging a grave by a large boulder at the foot of the mountains that Burton had an illuminating flash of memory. He had

stopped working to take a drink of water when he happened to look at Goering. The completely stripped head and the features, peaceful now as if sleeping, opened a trapdoor in his mind.

When he had awakened in that colossal chamber and found himself floating in a row of bodies, and had managed to get to the narrow catwalk between the rows and had prowled around for a while, he had seen this face. It had belonged to the body in the row next to his. Goering, like all the other sleepers, had had his head shaved. Burton had only noted him in passing during the short time before the warders had detected him. Later, after the mass resurrection, when he had met Goering, he had not seen the similarity between the sleeper and this man who had a full head of blondish hair.

But he knew now that this man had occupied the space next to his.

Was it possible that their two resurrectors, so close to each other, had become locked in phase? If so, whenever his death and Goering's took place at the same approximate time, then the two would be raised again by the same grailstone. Goering's jest that they were twin souls might not be so far off the mark.

Burton resumed digging, swearing at the same time because he had so many questions and so few answers. If he had another chance to get his hands on an Ethical, he would drag the answers out of him, no matter what methods he had to use.

The next three months, Burton was busy adjusting himself to the strange society in this area. He found himself fascinated by the new language that was being formed out of the clash between Sumerian and Samoan. Since the former were the most numerous, their tongue dominated. But here, as elsewhere, the major language suffered a Pyrrhic victory. Result of the fusion was a pidgin, a speech with greatly reduced flexion and simplified syntax. Grammatical gender went overboard; words were syncopated; tense and aspect of verbs were cut to a simple present, which was used also for the future. Adverbs of time indicated the past. Subtleties were replaced by expressions that both Sumerian and Samoan could understand, even if they seemed at first to be awkward and naive. And many Samoan words, in somewhat changed phonology, drove out Sumerian words.

This rise of pidgins was taking place everywhere up and down the rivervalley. Burton reflected that if the Ethicals had intended to record all human tongues. they had best hurry. The old ones were dying out, transmuting rather. But for all he knew, they had already completed the job. Their recorders, so necessary for accomplishing the physical translation, might also be taking down all speech.

In the meantime, at evenings. when he had a chance to be alone, he smoked the cigars so generously offered by the grails and tried to analyze the situation. Whom could he believe, the Ethicals or the ren-

egade, the Mysterious Stranger? Or were both lying?

Why did the Mysterious Stranger need him to throw a monkey wrench into their cosmic machinery? What could Burton, a mere human being, trapped in this valley, so limited by his ignorance, do to help the Judas?

One thing was certain. If the Stranger did not need him, he would not have concerned himself with Burton. He wanted to get Burton into that Tower at the north pole.

Why?

It took Burton two weeks before he thought of the only reason that could be.

The Stranger had said that he, like the other Ethicals, would not directly take human life. But he had no scruples about doing so vicariously, as witness his giving the poison to Burton. So, if he wanted Burton in the Tower, he needed Burton to kill for him. He would turn the tiger loose among his own people, open the window to the hired assassin.

An assassin wants pay. What did the Stranger offer?

Burton sucked the cigar into his lungs, exhaled and then downed a shot of bourbon. Very well. The Stranger would try to use him. But let him beware. Burton would also use him.

At the end of three months, Burton decided that he had done enough drinking. It was time to get out.

He was swimming in the river at the moment and, following the impulse, he swam to its center. He dived down as far as he could force himself before the not-to-be-denied will of his body to survive drove him to claw upwards for the dear air. He did not make it. Afterwards, he knew that the scavenging fishes would eat his body and his bones would fall to the mud at the bottom of the reputedly 500-foot deep river. So much the better. He did not want his body to fall into the hands of the Ethicals. If what the Stranger had said was true, they might be able to unthread from his mind all he had seen and heard if they got to him before the brain cells were damaged.

He did not think they had succeeded. During the next seven years, as far as he knew, he escaped detection of the Ethicals. If the renegade knew where he was, he did not let Burton know. Burton doubted that anyone did; he himself could not ascertain in what part of the riverplanet he was, how far or how near the Tower headwaters. But he was going, going, going, always on the move. And one day he knew that he must have broken a record of some sort. Death had become second nature to him.

If his count was correct, he had made 777 trips on The Suicide Express.

XIII

Sometimes Burton thought of himself as a planetary grasshopper, launching himself out into the darkness of death, landing, nibbling a little at the grass, with one eye cocked for the shadow that betrayed the downswoop of the shrike—the Ethicals. In this vast meadow of humanity, he had sam-

pled many blades, tasted briefly, and then had gone on.

Other times he thought of himself as a net scooping up specimens here and there in the huge sea of mankind. He got a few big fish and many sardines, although there was as much, if not more, to be learned from the small as the large fish.

He did not like the metaphor of the net, however, because it reminded him that there was a much larger net out for him.

Whatever metaphors or similes he used, he was a man who got around a lot, to use a 20th-Century Americanism. So much so that he several times came across the legend of Burton the Gypsy, or, in one English-speaking area, Richard the Rover, and, in another, the Loping Lazarus. This worried him somewhat, since the Ethicals might get a clue to his method of evasion and be able to take some kind of measures to trap him. Or they might even guess at his basic goal and set up guards near the headwaters.

At the end of the seven years, through much observation of the day-stars and through many conversations, he had formed a picture of the course of the river.

It was not an amphisbaena, a snake with two heads, headwaters at the north pole and mouth at the south pole. It was a Midgard Serpent, with the tail at the north pole, the body coiled around and around the planet and the tail in the serpent's mouth. The river's source stemmed from the north polar sea, zigzagged back and forth across one hemisphere, circled the south pole and then zigzagged across the face of the other hemisphere, back and forth, ever working upward until the mouth opened into the hypothetical polar sea.

Nor was the large body of water so hypothetical. If the story of the Titanthrop, the subhuman who claimed to have seen the Misty Tower, was true, the Tower rose out of the fog-shrouded sea.

Burton had heard the tale only at second-hand. But he had seen the Titanthrops near the beginning of the river on his first "jump," and it seemed reasonable that one might actually have crossed the mountains and gotten close enough to get a glimpse of the polar area. Where one man had gone, another could follow.

And how did the river flow uphill?

Its rate of speed seemed to remain constant even where it should have slowed or refused to go further. From this he postulated localized gravitational fields that urged the mighty stream onwards until it had regained an area where natural gravity would take over. Somewhere, perhaps buried under the river itself, were devices that did this work. Their fields must be very restricted, since the pull of the earth did not vary on human beings in these areas to any detectable degree.

There were too many questions. He must go on until he got to the place or to the beings who could answer them.

And seven years after his first death, he reached the desired area.

It was on his 777th "jump," a number he was convinced was lucky for him. Burton, despite the scoffings of his 20th-century friends, believed steadfastly in most of the superstitions he had nourished on Earth. He often laughed at the superstitions of others, but he knew that some numbers held good fortune for him, that silver placed on his eyes would rejuvenate his body when tired and would help his second sight, the perception that warned him ahead of time of situations evil for him. True, there seemed to be no silver on this mineral-poor world, but if there were, he could use it to advantage.

All that first day, he stayed at the edge of the river. He paid little attention to those who tried to talk to him, giving them a brief smile. Unlike people in most of the areas he had seen, these were not hostile. The sun moved along the eastern peaks, seemingly just clearing their tops. The flaming ball slid across the valley, lower than he had ever seen it before, except when he had landed among the grotesquely nosed Titanthrops. The sun flooded the valley for a while with light and warmth, and then began its circling just above the western mountains. The valley became shadowed, and the air became colder than it had been any other place. Except, of course, on that first jump. The sun continued to circle until it was again at the point where Burton had first seen it on opening his eyes.

Weary from his twenty-four hour vigil, but happy, he turned to look for living quarters. He knew now that he was in the arctic area, but he was not at a point just below the headwaters. This time, he was at the other end, the mouth.

As he turned, he heard a voice, familiar but unidentifiable. (He had heard so many.)

Dull soul aspire:
Thou ort not Eorth. Mount higherl
Heaven gove the spark; to it return
the fire.

"John Collop!"

"Abdul ibn Harun! And they say there are no miracles. What has happened to you since last I saw you?"

"I died the same night you did," Burton said. "And several times since. There are many evil men in this world."

"Tis only natural. There were many on Earth. Yet I dare say their number has been cut down, for the Church has been able to do much good work, praise God. Especially in this area. But come with me, friend. I'll introduce you to my hutmate. A lovely woman, faithful in a world that still seems to put little value on marital fidelity or, indeed, in virtue of any sort. She was born in the 20th century A.D. and taught English most of her life. Verily, I sometimes think she loves me not so much for myself as for what I can teach her of the speech of my time."

He gave a curious nervous laugh, by which Burton knew that he was joking.

They crossed the plains toward the foothills where fires were burning on small stone platforms be-

fore each hut. Most of the men and women had fastened towels around them to form parkas which shielded them from the chill of the shadows.

"A gloomy and shivering place," Burton said. "Why would anybody want to live here?"

"Most of these people be Finns or Swedes of the late 20th century. They are used to the midnight sun. However, ye should be happy you're here. I remember your burning curiosity about the polar regions and your speculations anent. There have been others like you who have gone on down the river to seek their ultima Thule, or if you will pardon me for so terming it, the fool's gold at the end of the rainbow. But all have either failed to return or have come back, daunted by the forbidding obstacles."

"Which are what?" Burton said, grabbing Collop's arm.

"Friend, you're hurting me. Item, the grailrocks cease, so that there is nothing wherewith they may recharge their grails with food. Item, the plains of the valley suddenly terminate, and the river pursues its course between the mountains themselves, through a chasm of icy shadows. Item, what lies beyond, I do not know, for no man has come back to tell me. But I fear they've met the end of all who commit the sin of hubris."

"How far away is this plunge of no return?"

"As the river winds, about 25,000 miles. You may get there with diligent sailing in a year or more. The Almighty Father alone knows how far ye must then go before you arrive at the very end of the river. Belike you'd starve before then, because you'd have to take provisions on your boat after leaving the final grailstone."

"There's one way to find out," Burton said.

"Nothing will stop ye then, Richard Burton?" Collop said. "You will not give up this fruitless chase after the physical when ye should be hot on the track of the metaphysical?"

Burton seized Collop by the arm again. "You said Burton?"

"Yes, I did. Your friend Goering told me some time ago that that was your true name. He also told me other things about you."

"Goering is here?"

Collop nodded and said, "He has been here for about two years now. He lives a mile from here. We can see him tomorrow. You will be pleased at the change in him, I know. He has conquered the dissolution begun by the dreamgum, shaped the fragments of himself into a new. and a far better, man. In fact, he is now the leader of the Church of the Second Chance in this area.

"While you, my friend, have been questing after some irrelevant grail outside you, he has found the holiness inside himself. He almost perished from madness, nearly fell back into the evil ways of his Terrestrial life. But through the grace of God and his true desire to show himself worthy of being given another opportunity at life, he . . . well, you may see for yourself tomorrow. And I pray you will profit from his example."

Collop elaborated. Goering had died almost as many times as Burton, largely by suicide. Unable to stand the nightmares and the daytime self-loathing, he had time and again purchased a brief and useless surcease. Only to be faced with himself the next day. But on arriving at this area, and seeking help from Collop, the man he had once murdered, he had won.

"I am astonished," Burton said. "And I'm happy for Goering. But I have other goals. I would like your promise that you'll tell no one my true identity. Allow me to be Abdul ibn Harun."

Collop said that he would keep silent, although he was disappointed that Burton would not be able to see Goering again and judge for himself what faith and love could do for even the seemingly hopeless and depraved. He then took Burton to his hut and introduced him to his wife, a short, delicately boned brunette. She was very gracious and friendly and insisted on going with the two men while they visited the local boss, the *valkotukkainen*. (This word was regional slang for the white-haired boy or big shot.)

Ville Ahonen was a huge quiet-spoken man who listened patiently. Burton revealed only half of his plan, saying that he wanted to build a boat so he could travel to the end of the river. He did not mention wanting to take it further. But Ahonen had evidently met others like him.

He smiled knowingly and replied that Burton could build a craft. However, the people hereabouts were conservationists. They did not believe in despoiling the land of its trees. Oak and pine were to be left untouched, but bamboo was available. Even this material would have to be purchased with cigarettes and liquor, which would take him some time to accumulate from his grail.

Burton thanked him and left. Later, he slept in a hut near Collop's. He could not get to sleep.

Shortly before the inevitable rains came, he decided to leave the hut. He would go up into the mountains, take refuge under a ledge until the rains ceased, the clouds dissipated, and the eternal (but weak) sun reasserted itself. Now that he was so near to his goal, he did not want to be surprised by them. And it seemed likely that the Ethicals would concentrate agents here. For all he knew, Collop's wife could be one of them.

Before he had walked half a mile, rain struck him and lightning smashed nearby into the ground. By the dazzling flash, he saw something flicker into existence just ahead and about twenty feet above him.

He whirled and ran towards a grove of trees, hoping that they had not seen him and that he could hide there. If he was unobserved, then he could get up into the mountains. And when they had put everybody to sleep here, they would find him gone again ... .

XIV

THE END OF THE LINE

"You gave us a long hard chase, Burton," a man said in English.

Burton opened his eyes. The transition to this place was so unexpected that he was dazed. But only for a second. He was sitting in a chair of some very soft buoyant material. The room was a perfect sphere; the walls were a very pale green and were semitransparent. He could see other spherical chambers on all sides, in front, behind, above and, when he bent over, below. Again he was confused, since the other rooms did not just impinge upon the boundaries of his sphere. They intersected. Sections of the other rooms came into his room, but then became so colorless and clear that he could barely detect them.

On the wall at the opposite end of his room was an oval of darker green. It curved to follow the wall. There was a ghostly forest portrayed in the oval. A phantom fawn trotted across the picture. From it came the odor of pine and dogwood.

Across the bubble from him sat twelve in chairs like his. Six were men; six, women. All were very good-looking. Except for two, all had black or dark brown hair and deeply tanned skins. Three had slight epicanthic folds; one man's hair was so curly it was almost kinky.

The two non-brunettes were a man and a woman. The woman had long wavy yellow hair bound into a psyche knot. The man had red hair, red as the fur of a fox. He was handsome but not as the others. His features were irregular, his nose larger and almost curved, and his eyes were dark green.

All were dressed in silvery or purple blouses with short flaring sleeves and ruffled collars, slender luminescent belts, kilts, and sandals. Both men and women had painted fingernails and toenails, lipstick, earrings and eye makeup.

Above the head of each, almost touching the hair, spun a many-colored globe about a foot across. These whirled and flashed and changed color, running through every hue in the spectrum. From time to time, the globes thrust out long hexagonal arms of green, of blue, of black or of gleaming white. Then the arms would collapse, only to be succeeded by other hexagons.

Burton looked down. He was clad only in a black towel secured at his waist.

"I'll forestall your first question by telling you we won't give you any information on where you are."

The speaker was the red-haired man. He grinned at Burton, showing unhumanly white teeth.

"Very well," Burton said. "What questions will you answer, whoever you are? For instance, how did you find me?"

"My name is Loga," the red-haired man said. "We found you through a combination of detective work and luck. It was a complicated procedure, but I'll simplify it for you. We had a number of agents looking for you, a pitifully small number, considering the 36 billion, six million, nine thousand, six hundred and thirty-seven candidates that live along the river."

Candidates? Burton thought. Candidates for what? For eternal life?

Had Spruce told the truth about the purpose behind the resurrection?

Loga said, "We had no idea that you were escaping us by suicide. Even when you were detected in areas so widely separated that you could not possibly have gotten to them except through resurrection, we did not suspect. We thought that you had been killed and thus translated. The years went by. We had no idea where you were. There were other things for us to do, so we pulled all agents from the Burton Case, as we called it, except for some stationed at both ends of the river. Somehow, you had knowledge of the polar tower. Later we found out how. Your friends Goering and Collop were very helpful, although they did not know they were talking to Ethicals, of course."

"Who notified you that I was near the river's end?" Burton said.

Loga smiled and said, "There's no need for you to know. However, we would have caught you anyway. You see, every space in the restoration bubble—the place where you unaccountably awakened during the pre-resurrection phase—has an automatic counter. They were installed for statistical and research purposes. We like to keep records of what's going on. For instance, any candidate who has a higher than average number of deaths sooner or later is a subject for study. Usually later, since we're short-handed.

"It was not until your 777th death that we got around to looking at some of the higher frequency resurrections. Yours had the highest count. You may be congratulated on this, I suppose."

"There are others like myself?"

"They're not being pursued, if that's what you mean. And, relatively speaking, they're not many. We had no idea that it was you who had racked up this staggering number. Your space in the PR bubble was empty when we looked at it during our statistical investigation. Suddenly, we knew the space belonged to you. We were all aware of the puzzling two technicians who had seen you identified you by your . . . photograph.

"We set the resurrector so that the next time your body was to be re-created, an alarm would notify us, and we would bring you here to this place."

"Suppose I hadn't died again?" Burton said.

"You were destined to die! You planned on trying to enter the polar sea via the river's mouth, right? That is impossible. The last hundred miles of the river go through an underground tunnel. Any boat would be torn to pieces. Like others who have dared the journey, you would have died."

Burton said, "My photograph—the one I took from Agneau. That was obviously taken on Earth when I was an officer for John Company in India. How was that gotten?"

"Research, Mr. Burton," said Loga, still smiling.

Burton wanted to smash the look of superiority on his face. He did not seem to be restrained by anything; he could, seemingly, walk over to Loga and strike him. But he knew

that the Ethicals were not likely to sit in the same room with him without safeguards. They would as soon have given a grizzly bear its freedom.

"Did you ever find out what made me awaken before my time?" he asked. "Or what made those others gain consciousness, too?"

Loga gave a start. Several of the men and women gasped. All lost their relaxed appearance.

Loga rallied first. He said, "We've made a thorough examination of your body. You have no idea how thorough. We have also screened every component of your . . . psychomorph, I think you could call it. Or aura, whichever word you prefer." He gestured at the sphere above his head. "We found no clues whatsoever."

Burton threw his head back and laughed loudly and long.

"So you bastards don't know everything!"

Loga smiled tightly. "No. We never will. Only One is omnipotent."

He touched his forehead, lips, heart and genitals with the three longest fingers of his right hand. The others did the same.

"However, I'll tell you that you frightened us—if that'll make you feel any better. You still do. You see, we're fairly sure that you may be the one of the men of whom we were warned."

"Warned against? By whom?"

"By a . . . sort of giant computer, a living one. And by its operator." Again he made the curious sign with his fingers. "That's all I care to tell you—even though you won't remember a thing that occurs down here after we send you back to the river-valley."

Burton's mind was clouded with anger, but not so much that he missed the "down here." Did that mean that the resurrection machinery and the hideout of the Ethicals were below the surface of the river-world?

Loga continued, "The data indicates you may be the man who will wreck our plans. Why you should or how you might, we do not know. But we respect our source of information, how highly you can't imagine."

"If you believe that," Burton said, "why don't you just put me in cold storage? Suspend me between those two bars, leave me floating in space, turning around and around like a roast on a spit, until your plans are completed?"

Loga said, "We couldn't do that! That act alone would ruin everything! How would you attain your salvation? Besides, that would mean an unforgivable violence on our part! It's unthinkable!"

"You were being violent when you forced me to run and hide from you," Burton said. "You are being violent now by holding me here against my will. And you will violate me when you destroy my memory of this little tete-a-tete with you."

Loga almost wrung his hands. In a grieved tone, he said, "That is only partly true. We had to take certain measures to protect ourselves. If the man had been anyone but you, we would have left you strictly

alone. It's true we violated our own code of ethics by making you flee Theleme and by examining you. That had to be, however. And, believe me, we are paying for this in mental agony."

"You could make up for some of it by telling me why I, why all the human beings that ever lived, have been resurrected. And how you did it."

XV

Loga talked, with occasional interruptions from some of the others. The yellow-haired woman broke in most often, and after a while Burton deduced from her attitude and Loga's that she was either his wife or she held a high position.

Another man interrupted at times. When he did, there was a concentration and respect from the others that led Burton to believe he was the head of this group. Once he turned his head so that the light sparkled off one eye. Burton stared, because he had not noticed before that the left eye was a jewel. At least, its hexagonal and slightly protruding and multicolored appearance was that of a jewel. But Burton thought that it probably was a device which gave him a sense, or senses, of perception denied the others. From then on, Burton felt uncomfortable whenever the faceted and gleaming eye was turned on him. What did that many-angled prism see?

At the end of the explanation, Burton, did not know much more than he had before. The Ethicals could see back into the past with a sort of chronoscope; with this they had been able to record whatever physical beings they wished to. Using these records as models, they had then performed the resurrection with energy-matter converters.

"What," Burton said, "would happen if you re-created two bodies of an individual at the same time?"

Loga smiled wryly and said that the experiment had been performed. Only one body had life.

Burton smiled like a cat that has just eaten a mouse. He could almost be seen licking his chops. He said, "I think you're lying to me. Or telling me half-truths. There is a fallacy in all this. If human beings can attain such a rarefiedly high ethical state that they 'go on,' why are you Ethicals, supposedly superior beings, still here? Why haven't you, too, 'gone on'?"

The faces of all but Loga and the jewel-eyed man became rigid. Loga laughed and said, "Very shrewd. An excellent point. I can only answer that some of us do go on. But we have higher qualifications than you candidates. More is demanded of us, ethically speaking."

"I still think you're lying," Burton said. "However, there's nothing I can do about it." He grinned and said, "Not just now, anyway."

"If you persist in that attitude, you will never go on," Loga said. "But we felt that we owed it to you to explain what we are doing—as best we could. When we catch those others who have been tampered with, we'll do the same for them."

"There's a Judas among you,"

Burton said, enjoying the effect of his words on his captors.

But the jewel-eyed man said, "Why don't you tell him the truth, Loga? It'll wipe off that sickening smirk and put him in his proper place."

Loga hesitated, then said, "Very well, Thanabur. Burton, you will have to be very careful from now on. No more suicides, and you must fight as hard to stay alive as you did on Earth, when you thought you had only one life. There is a limit to the number of times a man may be resurrected. After a certain amount — it varies and there's no way to predict the individual allotment—the psychomorph seems unable to reattach itself to the body. Every death weakens the 'attraction' between body and psychomorph. Eventually, the psychomorph comes to the point of no return. It becomes a—well, to use an unscientific term —a 'lost soul.' It wanders bodiless through the universe; we can detect these unattached psychomorphs with our instruments, unlike those of the — how shall I put it? — the 'saved,' which disappear entirely from our ken.

"So you see, you must give up this form of travel by death. This is why continued suicide by those poor unfortunates who cannot face life is, if not the unforgivable sin, the irrevocable."

The jewel-eyed man said. "The traitor. the filthy unknown who claims to be aiding you—was actually using you for his own purposes. He did not tell you that you were expending your chance for eternal life by carrying out his—and your—designs. He, or she, whoever the traitor is, is evil. Evil, evil!

"Therefore, you must be careful from now on. You may have a residue of a dozen or slightly more deaths left to you. Or your next death may be your last!"

Burton stood up and shouted, "You don't want me to reach the river's end? Why? Why?"

Loga said, "Au revoir. Forgive us for this violence."

Burton did not see any of the twelve persons point an instrument at him. But consciousness sprang from him as swiftly as an arrow from the bow, and he awoke . . .

XVI

AT THE POINT OF DEPARTURE—THELEME

There the first person to greet him was his 20th-century Yankee friend, Peter Frigate. Frigate lost his customary reserve on seeing him, and wept. Burton cried a little himself and had difficulty for a while in answering Frigate's many piled - one - on - the - other questions. First, Burton had to find out what Frigate, Loghu and Alice had done after he had disappeared. Frigate replied that the three had looked for him, then had smiled back up the river to Theleme.

"Where have you been?" Frigate said.

"From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it," Burton said. "However,

unlike Satan, I found at least several perfect and upright men, fearing God and eschewing evil. Damn few, though. Most men and women are still the selfish, ignorant, superstitious, self-blinding, hypocritical, cowardly wretches they were on Earth. And in most the old red-eyed killer ape struggles with its keeper, society, and would break out and bloody its hands."

Frigate chattered away as the two walked towards the huge stockade a mile away, the council building which housed the administration of the state of Theleme. Burton half-listened. He was shaking and his heart was beating hard, but not because of his home-coming.

He remembered!

Contrary to what Loga had promised, he remembered both his wakening in the pre-resurrection bubble, so many years ago, and the inquisition with the twelve Ethicals.

There was only one explanation. One of the twelve must have tampered with him and had somehow prevented the blocking of his memory and done so without the others knowing of it.

One of the twelve was the Mysterious Stranger, the renegade.

Which one? At present, there was no way of determining. But some day he would mind out. Meanwhile, he had a friend in court, a man who might be using Burton for his own ends. And the time would come when Burton would use him.

There were the other human beings with whom the Stranger had also tampered. Perhaps he would find them; together they would assault the Tower.

Odysseus had his Athena. Usually Odysseus had had to get out of perilous situations through his own wits and courage. But every now and then, when the goddess had been able, she had given Odysseus a helping hand.

Odysseus had his Athena; Burton, his Mysterious Stranger.

Frigate said, "What do you plan on doing, Dick?"

"I'm going to build a boat and sail up the river. All the way! Want to come along?" END

THE KINDLY INVASION

by CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

Conquering Earth was no trouble at all . . . their troubles began later on!

He sat at the solid oak desk where he had sat for forty years, and methodically went through correspondence as the cheers drifted up from the avenue below. His back stayed turned to the window where the confetti and ticker tape fluttered down. Below, in the street, the cheers rose to a wild crescendo, but he looked up only when an urgent tapping sounded on the door.

"Come in."

It was one of the new girls from the office, with several others behind her.

"Oh, Mr. Peabody, *could* we look out your window?"

He looked at the girls' eager faces, slid a personal letter back into its envelope, and growled crustily, "Go ahead."

The girls were delighted. "Oh, *thank* you, Mr. Peabody." They rushed to the window as Peabody devoted himself to routine correspondence. Behind him, suppressed gigglings, murmurings, and sighs told how the girls wished to join their screams with those of the crowd below. Under his breath, Peabody growled, "The damn fools."

Down in the avenue, the cries finally began to die away into the distance, and Peabody frowned at the last letter, wrote in the margin, "Tell him, no. Let him get a patent first." He glanced up and cleared his throat, and the girls turned guiltily and left the window, to troop out, saying, "Thank you, Mr. Peabody."

He smiled drily. "You're welcome. But what did you see?"

"Oh," said one of the girls ex-

citedly, "we saw the envoy's car!"

"And," said another, "we could see him waving!"

"A green arm?" said Peabody, "—or a white or brown one?"

The girls looked thunderstruck.

"Well," said one, "it must have been someone *with* him. It could even have been the President."

A small, beautifully built girl said urgently. "Didn't you *want* to see him, Mr. Peabody?"

Peabody's eyes gave a frosty glint. "I'm not interested in interstellar shell games. Or confidence men, human *or* alien."

The girls looked shocked. The girl who'd asked the question said earnestly, "But the *serum,* the—"

Peabody waved his neatly trimmed square hand. "All humbug. Never put a hook in the water without bait on it."

"But," cried the girl, "I *know* the Shaloux would never—they're *sincere.* Have you watched, on the TV, when they told about—"

"I seldom watch television. I get my news from the papers, where I can take it in at my own pace, and pick out the bones, instead of swallowing it all whole. No, I don't trust the Shaloux. What's their motive? *Why* do they offer us this 'life-serum'? What do *they* get out of it?"

The girl blinked at him. plainly incapable of following his line of reasoning, or even of crediting the possibility that anyone *could* reason that way. She started to speak, but Peabody cut her off.

"No, that's enough." He smiled. "While we chatter on company time, business is going to the dogs."

The girls laughed dutifully, thanked him again, and closed the door gently.

Peabody took out the letter he'd been reading before they came in. He finished his reply, then sent the lot out to be typed, or sent on at once to the company officers who would deal with the problems as directed.

He sat back, put his hands behind his head, and waited. One reply was bound to bring a lightning-fast response.

The phone rang.

Peabody picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Peabody? This is Charles Lathrop. I have your memo on pricing here. I—ah—I realize you like all major company decisions and differences in writing, but the price you want us to set on this new .30 Recoilless Repeating Sharpshooter —"Lathrop hesitated, as if groping for suitable words. "I just want to be certain there's no *error.* This price—"

Peabody snapped, "What about it?"

"Well, sir, it's—it's pretty fantastic—"

"Don't you think they'll sell at $37.50?"

Lathrop made a kind of desperate gobbling noise.

"Sir, they'd sell like wildfire at a hundred thirty-seven fifty. Sir, this gun uses a completely new principle, and—"

"I'm aware of it."

"No one else can match it. We've

got a temporary practical monopoly."

"Good. We can do what we want."

"Yes, sir, and that's exactly why we should charge $137.50. This would rob no one. It would benefit everyone. Here we've got a gun that will punch a hole through eight feet of pine boards, and it's got the kick of a pussycat. A ten-shot magazine, with Lightning Reload Guides, a flat trajectory, minimum maintenance, maximum reliability, tough, rugged, dependable, accurate beyond belief. Sir, the *right* price for this is $199.95, and that's dirt cheap at the price."

"We're charging $37.50."

There was a silence. Finally Lathrop said, "Could you tell me *why*, sir?"

"Are we going to lose money on it?"

"N-No. This way we'll still make a bare profit. But we *could* make a mint."

"But this way, we'll sell more guns."

"Yes, there's no doubt of that."

"And this is quite an effective gun."

"It certainly is."

"And it can take surplus ammunition."

"Yes, but after you use enough of any kind of steel-jacketed ammo —"

"One thing at a time, Lathrop. Now, how popular is this gun going to be?"

"Very popular. But I still don't see why —"

"Won't it be the most popular gun Peabody Arms and Ammunition ever produced?"

"Yes, sir. I have to admit, it certainly will be. We've already been swamped with inquiries. This gun will be a household word for excellence inside a month."

"All right. Now, every man likes to leave some monument behind him. Something to be remembered for."

"But, Mr. Peabody!" Lathrop's voice advertised his astonishment. "All you have to do is take the serum —"

"I'm not anxious to remain my present age for the next few thousand years, Lathrop. Moreover, I don't trust the Shaloux."

"But all you have to do is to let them open their minds to you! You'll see that they're kindly, benevolent, loving. All they care about is to help others!"

Peabody looked at the phone as if he smelled rotten fish. He said coldly, "The price of the gun will be $37.50."

There was a sigh of resignation. "Yes, Mr. Peabody."

Peabody hung up. Now, that was taken care of, and he had a nice plausible reason for his action. Anyone could understand it. No one could confine him to an institution for it. He shoved the phone back, reached into the bottom drawer of his desk, and pulled out the morning edition he'd glanced through on the train. There were the huge headlines staring at him:

SHALOUX OKAY EARTH!
FULL MEMBERSHIP NOW!

Peabody snorted. "Humbug. Silly claptrap." He read on:

New Serum Shipment
100% Inoculation
Is Shaloux Aim

"Sure," growled Peabody. "But why? What's *their* aim. What do *they* get out of it?"

He read further:

Open-Mind Conference Held

Peabody slammed down the paper. "Open-mind! Everybody's supposed to have an 'open mind'. Humbug! Open it far enough, and *who knows* what will come in? The whole thing's a trap. Leave the door open, to prove you trust everyone. Then the thieves can strip the house and put a knife in you while you sleep."

Cautiously, he began to read the paper, conscious of the article's bias, opening his mind just a little slit at a time to bash the unwelcome ideas over the head as they entered:

Washington — Miliram Diastat, the benevolent (How the devil do *they* know he's benevolent?) plenipotentiary (Hogwash. He may be just a messenger boy.) of the Shaloux Interstellar (They could come from Mars, for all we know.) Federation, met with the President today, and in solemn rapport (What's "rapport" *really* mean? Maybe it's hynotism.) Concluded the mind-exchange (Or brainwashing) which is a precondition for entry into (defeat by) the Federation.

Mr. Diastat (Why call him "Mr."? The damned things are neuter.) assured reporters afterward that all had gone well (For the Shalouxs, that is.) in the mind-exchange (brain-washing). He said (*It* said), raising his (its) hands (extremities of upper tentacles) to heaven (over its head — that is, over the end of the thing with teeth in it.), that our peoples will be joined as one (eaten up) with (by) theirs, in a final ceremony next year. At that time. travel throughout the vast extent (*They* claim it's vast.) of the Federation will be free to all (Economically impossible.), and Earth's excess-population problem will be solved (Everybody will be killed.), while at the same time (never) personal immortality will have been granted by universal (Humbug. There must be *some* people with sense enough to keep out.) inoculation with the serum (slow poison).

Peabody read on, scowling, about the heaven-on-earth that would come about with the wonders of interstellar science, about how everything was to be free, all the work was to be done automatically, and everyone in the Shaloux Federation was invariably happy. He snorted, growled, cursed under his breath. The Shaloux, the paper went on. were loving and kindly, because that was how they were educated to be: and in their Federation, advanced methods of production rendered the satisfaction of every ordinary desire not only possible but practically instantaneous. The abundance of space in the universe cut friction between differing ways to a minimum.

Peabody rejected the whole line of argument, then angrily turned the page, and studied a photograph of Miliram Diastat, the Plenipotentiary from the Shaloux Federation, who was shown "shaking hands" with the President. The paper also showed a view of him head-on, so to speak. The caption compared the plenipotentiary to a "large mint-green teddy bear," but to Peabody the creature looked like a giant cucumber with a lot of teeth in one end, stood generally upright but with a forward tilt, and equipped with two sets of tentacles, top and bottom, and a tail with a barb-like sting ray. Beneath the picture, the paper quoted a speech in which this entity was referred to as "Our Brother from the Stars."

Peabody threw the paper down in disgust.

Grant the *possibility*, he thought, that all this *might* be true. After all, nearly anything *could* be possible. But was it likely? Did it fit in with experience? Did it add up?

He jammed the paper into the waste basket, and sent for one of the new girls.

"Have you," he demanded, "taken the serum?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh, yes, sir. I don't want ever to get a day older."

"What happens if you fall down in the bathtub?"

"Well —" She blushed. "I intend to be careful."

"I mean, accidents could end immortality pretty fast."

"Yes, sir, but I'm *sure* the Shaloux have some answer."

"You've — ah — 'exchanged minds' with them, and that convinces you?"

"Oh, yes, sir. They're perfectly straightforward and well-intentioned. All you have to do is to let them *show* you. You just open your mind to them."

"There's a machine involved, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir, but that's just because we aren't developed far enough to do it direct. It's just a *little* machine anyway. It's not much bigger than a hat box."

Peabody shook his head. An atom-bomb was just a comparatively *little* thing.

This whole business, he told himself, stunk. Aloud, he said. "It's all hogwash."

The girl smiled. "Sir, excuse me. If the experts all believe it —"

"The experts all have open minds."

"But isn't an open mind the best?"

"That depends on who's trying to put what into it."

"But you *can't prejudge*."

Peabody snorted. "If I see somebody, who would profit by murdering another man, secretively sift a powder into this other man's drink. I'll prejudge him. I may go wrong this way, but not often. What you have to consider is, *what's their motive?*"

The girl looked at him almost with pity. "Sir, honestly, you really *should* let them show you their minds. And you should open your mind to them. They could help you so much."

Peabody instantly closed his mind

to that suggestion, and to the girl's almost loving kindly tone.

"I have my weaknesses," he said crustily, "but I hope walking into boobytraps isn't one of them. You talk about these monsters as if they're angels. They don't look angelic to me. The devil with it. Take a letter."

The next six months passed in what, for Peabody, was equivalent to a siege. Hosts of fantastic ideas clamored at the locked, door of his mind, seeking admission. His own brother "exchanged minds", took the serum, saw the light, and tried to convert him. Peabody added another bar to his mental door, and installed bolts at top, bottom, and on the hinge side, just in case. He didn't rest content with having closed the main entrance to his mind. He watched alertly for anything that might have figuratively sneaked in through the cellar window; and when he found it, in the form, say, of a grudging thought that it would be only fair to the Shaloux to *try* their mind-trading — when he found such a thought, he ruthlessly broke it down to its essentials, rejected the bits and pieces, and held the fort secure. As the press, radio, TV, and ordinary everyday conversation praised the Shaloux and their selfless Federation, the urgent ideas bounced off Peabody like BB-shot off a locked safe.

Meanwhile, the Peabody Miracle-Gun. as the new 30-caliber rifle came to be called, was making a hit on its own. Sales began to skyrocket. Profits crept up sedately. The exasperating rumor spread that the gun was Shaloux-designed, which infuriated the actual designer, but didn't overly trouble Peabody, as it increased sales. Sales, in fact, rapidly climbed to such a point that anti-gun fanatics grew virulent. Peabody pointed to his low profit-margin and bared his teeth in a grin like the Shaloux. The critics pointed to the gun's unprecedented power, range, accuracy, and the murderous effect of the specially shaped Shock bullet when it hit its target. Peabody put hand on heart and pleaded that in the coming age of Federation-inspired universal peace and understanding, no one would even think of using the guns against other *humans;* the gun would be just a momento of old Earth, and a merciful, quick-and-painless defense against unFederated monsters that might be run into occasionally on new worlds. On this piece of hypocrisy, the criticism foundered and expired.

By now, eleven months had gone by. A fever of expectation began to seize the world. In one more month, Earth would be a Federation member. When half of the last month was gone, a new rumor suddenly exploded into a stated fact: The advanced science of the Shaloux had discovered a new type of unversal antigen that would make any human who took the treatment proof against all known human diseases.

Peabody's office staff was amongst the first, locally, to take the treatment, and for two solid weeks they glowed with health as Peabody suffered with a miserable cold.

Peabody's mind stayed closed. but,

apparently from inside, the thought was germinated: "Suppose I'm wrong?"

In response, he thought coldly, "It wouldn't be the first time."

"But I could be giving up a lot out of sheer bullheadedness."

"*Somebody* has got to keep his head, and I won't quit now."

With the nucleus of an inner revolt threatening to erupt out of hand anytime, Peabody clamped himself under tight control, and devoted himself to stimulating the sale of his gun, an activity which, in flashes of another viewpoint, quickly suppressed, seemed almost childish.

Angrily, he told his errant thoughts, "When I'm convinced a thing like this is genuine, maybe then I'll cut loose from common sense. Not until."

By now, his incredible wrongheaded obstinacy was legendary among his acquaintances. Only a lingering wonder at the success of his gun kept them from kidding him mercilessly.

By now, too, everyone around him, with only rare stubborn exceptions, blazed with apparent health and well-being, while he crept around sniffling, sneezing, and muttering "Hogwash. It's humbug. All of it. There's a catch somewhere."

On the day before the admission of Earth to the great Shaloux Interstellar Federation, a new announcement rocked the world. Shaloux science had discovered how to reverse the human aging process. This was to be done by reinforcing "cellular memory," reversing "colloid crystallization," and "regenerating" nerve-cell tissue. The means of stimulating all this had been reduced to a few "key compounds" and "pseudo-viruses," that could be packed into a few pills. Anyone who had taken the life-serum, could now take the pills, and be seventeen years old into the indefinite future. Best of all, the whole process would take only a week or so to complete.

Wherever Peabody turned, men and women of all ages were now munching pills, and dutifully feeding them to children, who were thus guaranteed never to get older than seventeen.

The next day, when formal admission to the Federation was to take place, started off normally, thanks to the Shaloux request that through the city and the offices people go as usual to their places of business. But a little after one o'clock, a number of celebration parades began winding their way through the city, and the offices promptly emptied into the streets. Peabody, his back turned to the window, ignored the screams and shouts, and dictated to Miss Burell, a young, somewhat plain, but highly efficient secretary. As the noise from the street below reached its climax, he glanced at her curiously. "Are you sure you don't want to go down there?"

She shook her head. "I don't like screaming crowds. Besides, this whole business reminds me of the Pied Piper of Hamlin. And I don't believe in their life-serum."

"What about their universal cure?"

She looked unconvinced. "It may

be just what they say. But it doesn't ring true to me. And this latest thing — the pills that will make everyone seventeen —"

"Certainly," he said, smiling, "you understand that our wise elder brothers and their magnificent science —"

She looked at him as though he were insane — which made his smile grow wider — and said:

"It's awfully odd that we're supposed to eat this latest pill just a little before their big ships come down to carry out the so-called 'ceremony of admission.' "

"But if you've 'exchanged minds' with them under their hypnosis- machine, you realize that they're perfectly sincere and benevolent, don't you?"

"I wouldn't let them use that machine on me for a thousand dollars. All this something-for-nothing benevolence of theirs reminds me of a finance company. They'll put cash in my pocket, all right. But *then* what?" She poised her pencil to take dictation.

Peabody grinned, brought his mind back to the letter, started to speak, and paused.

From below, the only sound was a low grinding noise, followed by a repeated scraping sound.

He listened, heard a few distant, oddly inflected voices, then a harsh grating noise.

Frowning, he got to his feet, quietly slid the window up, and glanced down into the canyon between the buildings.

Down below, the sidewalks were heaped with motionless figures. In the street, bright-green Shaloux pulled the bunting and gay decorations off their stopped parade floats, to disclose the mud-colored vehicles beneath. With the brightly-colored cloth and paper gone, the first vehicle looked like an armored car, and the others like open amphibious personnel-carriers.

Peabody looked it all over, and nodded sourly.

"Miss Burell, in my coat closet you'll find several of our new rifles, and three big boxes of ammunition. If you'll bring out a rifle, and drag one of the boxes over here —"

She was gone in a flash, came back with one of the guns, and then slid out a large cardboard carton. The rifle fit neatly in Peabody's hands as he raised it, felt the two little pins that showed that the gun was loaded and the magazine full, moved the selector lever to semi-automatic, made sure the safety was off, and then paused as there came a tinkle of glass from across the street, where the windows were sealed shut for all-season air-conditioning.

A quick glance showed a man one floor down, taking aim with a rifle just like Peabody's.

Pam-pam-pam came the familiar sound, for the first time actually musical to Peabody's ears.

He looked down at the street, raised the gun, made due allowance for his height above the target, and squeezed the trigger.

The gun moved in his hand like a kitten batting lightly at a ball of yarn.

Down below, the control box of an open personnel-carrier erupted in a blaze of sparks.

Peabody adjusted his aim slightly, squeezed the trigger.

A large Shaloux exploded in a green haze of teeth and snakelike arms.

An amplified voice boomed out, "We are your Elder Brothers from the Stars! This is all a mistake! We — "

There was a quiet businesslike *pam-pam* from across the street, and that took care of the amplified voice.

From somewhere else came the sound of methodical firing. A line of holes stitched their way across the first of the line of Shaloux vehicles, suggesting that someone was trying the effect of the steel-jacketed ammunition.

Peabody sighted on the door of the vehicle, and plugged two Shaloux as they burst out. A third erupted through a trapdoor in the vehicle's roof, went off the top in a flying dive, and got around the corner so fast that there was no time for Peabody to even take aim. Nevertheless, the wall repeatedly exploded in flying fragments just behind the Shaloux as it streaked for cover.

Peabody was vaguely aware that Miss Burell was using one of the other guns to good effect, and that up and down the street, the occasional *pam-pam* had become an almost continuous murmur, suggesting that a small but definite percentage of humanity felt uneasy when offered the universe on a silver platter. He grinned.

A shadow slid over the face of the building across the way. Peabody realized this must be some kind of aircraft, stepped back from the window, and abruptly there was a dazzling blaze of light, a clap that shook the building, a clattering of broken glass, and then a long interval of swirling sickness.

When he came to, aching and dizzy, with ringing ears and a cheek that felt like ground meat, he was with a group of other people, being held upright before a large green creature at a curving desk.

It took Peabody a few moments to get used to the sight of Shaloux hurrying past in the corridor outside, Shaloux standing respectfully behind the creature across the desk, and Shaloux entering to bob briefly before the desk, exchange short bursts of gobble, and then back out into the corridor and hurry away.

Peabody could feel his hair prickle and his flesh crawl; but he kept his jaw stiff, and waited patiently. Eventually, some chance might present itself to do the Shaloux some more damage.

In due time, the creature at the desk realized that his captives were conscious, and turned toward them.

Speaking with great care, using a clear understandable pronunciation, the Shaloux said, "I am Miliram, Plenipotentiary of the Interstellar Federation."

Peabody's head throbbed, and he was faintly dizzy, but he paid close attention as the voice went on:

"We Shaloux wish to express our sincere regrets for what has happened. We are very sorry. You see,

the molecular composition of the human body is somewhat exceptional, and reacted rather strangely with our life-serum. This whole unfortunate incident, which we deeply regret, has come about because of the unusual allergic response of human tissues. We want you all to understand that we Shaloux meant no harm to you and your people, but were motivated only by the broadest and most humanitarian of reasons. You *do* understand that, don't you?"

In his mind's eye, Peabody could again see the unconcerned Shaloux ignore the prostrate humans, tear the bunting off their vehicles, then grind forward.

Someone said, "Allergic response? You mean all this was *accidental?*"

The Shaloux didn't hesitate. "Entirely. We are prostrated with grief."

Out of the corner of his eye, Peabody could see the Shaloux briefly hurrying past in the corridor.

The plenipotentiary went on smoothly:

"Brothers of Earth, believe me, we Shaloux *love* humans."

The words came out with such sincerity that Peabody almost forgot what he had seen with his own eyes. Around him, there was sickly sympathy. Peabody made the a murmur suggestive of a kind of same noise himself, as soon as he got control of his vocal apparatus.

"Then," said the Shaloux sincerely, "you, like we, all wish to make amends, to wash the misunderstanding away, once and for all?"

"Of course," murmured Peabody, adding to the mumble of agreement.

"You realize," said the Shaloux, "that we wish to make amends for the damage that has unfortunately been done to our human brothers? All the things that we promised will be yours, though it will take a little longer, since we must, first, improve the serum."

The last words "improve the serum" came out with a peculiar emphasis, and it dawned on Peabody that the plenipotentiary must still think that all humans had taken the drugs, but that a certain percentage, for some reason, had been unaffected and would just need stronger medicine. In that case, the Shaloux had no idea what they had accidentally done to the human race.

In a wishy-washy voice, someone near Peabody was saying, "Certainly we *must* do what we can to spread the word that all this is just a *dreadful* mistake. But surely, Mr. Plenipotentiary, if you merely *tell* them —"

"Unfortunately, before our — ah — information and assistance teams can get really near the survivors, who are equipped with truly vicious weapons, your countrymen shoot our — ah — aid men — and prevent us from clearing up the misunderstanding."

There were murmurs of shocked incredulity, even though everyone Peabody could see had a look that didn't quite fit the sound.

"This is terrible," said Peabody, speaking above the murmur, and putting sincerity in his voice. "How can we *stop it*?"

The plenipotentiary said earnestly, "We thought, perhaps, if their

own people told them, they would be more likely to listen, and to accept our sincere apologies."

"Yes," said someone, "that certainly seems very likely."

"And then," said the Shaloux, "perhaps you could have them all gather together in one spot, where we could care for them better, and give assistance to the survivors."

Peabody waited a few seconds till he trusted his voice. At that, he recovered before the rest could find anything to say. He murmured, "Yes, that certainly *would* be more efficient."

"Exactly." The plenipotentiary added sincerely, "If you people would like to exchange minds with me, to prove —"

Peabody did his best to nip that in the bud. "It isn't at all necessary. What you've said has completely reaffirmed our beliefs about the Shaloux Federation. We are anxious to get started."

The plenipotentiary beamed with what appeared to be satisfaction, murmured a few gobbling noises, and the guards released them.

An hour later, Peabody, Miss Burell, and the others were standing at the base of a hill looking back as the Shaloux aircraft that had brought them there dwindled into the distance.

Miss Burell said unbelievingly, "I never expected to get out of *there* alive."

Peabody felt as if he might pass out anytime. Still, he was better off than he'd been a little while ago. He cleared his throat. "They outsuckered themselves."

The ex-prisoners were glancing at each other. "Well," said one of them, "we must end this resistance to our wise Brothers from the Stars. Did anyone notice how thin that hull was?"

"Yeah. Half-a-dozen good men, with the Super-V steel-packeted ammo, in Peabody rifles —"

Miss Burell was looking around blankly, "Didn't *anybody* fall for that Shaloux?"

Peabody, despite his aches and pains, was starting to feel better.

"Consider," he said, "the Shaloux didn't kill people *at random*. Instead, they baited a trap, which *only attracted certain people*. What do you suppose they've done to the human race?"

"You mean, they've carried out something like natural selection, only faster?"

"Exactly. And who do you suppose they've selected as survivors?"

Back at Shaloux headquarters, Miliram Distat, the plenipotentiary, was having uneasy second thoughts. The possibility had just occurred to him that conceivably the human survivors had never taken the Shaloux life-serum in the first place, but had successfully resisted that bait. And in that case —

"Queasal," he said to a nearby psychological-warfare officer, "Ah A question of theory has just occurred to me."

"Yes, sir. You wish to know?"

"Ah-h'm. It is correct, is it not, that our standard Fast Conquest Procedure is based on the victim's desire to get something *free*?"

"Absolutely, sir. The Prime Bait is based on the invariable, universal SFN-trophic psychological reaction. Offer the victim Something-For-Nothing in a sufficiently alluring form, and you invariably suck in the whole local population, and can clean out one planet after another at very modest expense, without maintaining a burdensome planetary combat-force."

"Yes. Now — ah — as a hypothetical question — *if* we should ever run into a bunch, some of whom *lacked* this standard response — then what?"

"It would be a nasty situation, sir. After one of our operations, there is always an abundance of weapons, shelter, stored food, and so on; but, of course, it does the locals no good, because dead locals shoot no guns. But, in the hypothetical situation you mention, the survivors could make use of them, and would be very hard to root out. Worst yet, they would doubtless reproduce, and *h'm* — the characteristics of a *whole race* of such people would be frankly unpredic —" He paused. "Of course, this is all purely hypothetical, but as far as I'm concerned, I can tell you *I* would hate to experience —" He paused again, staring at the door through which the human prisoners had been led out. He swallowed uneasily, producing a characteristic reflex clicking of teeth that did not signify confidence.

The plenipotentiary cleared his breathing ducts, and spoke loudly. "Of course. Well, now we'll want to get ready to exterminate the rest of this present batch." He coughed, wheezed, and glanced back at Monolar Oia, his second-in command.

"Monolar, my boy," he said, "you know, I've been thinking about your advancement. A successful planetary occupation such as this present one could really help your career." He coughed painfully. "Personally, I've been feeling rather off my feed lately, and if you'd like to take over, why —"

Mlonolar looked as if he'd been doing some furious thinking, too. Before Diastat could finish his offer, Monolar said piously, "Sir, with me, you come first. This planet is the crowning jewel of *your* career, sir. I couldn't possibly excuse myself for being selfish about it."

Diatat squinted at the next officer in line, who was staring with foreboding out a porthole at the planet, sucking his teeth, and plainly readying some unctuous reply. There was no hope there.

The plenipotentiary turned from his officers to the large globe that showed an overall view of this planet where things had started out so promisingly. His face showed the hopeful expression of a crook with a nice confidence scheme, in need of exactly one thing to put it over — an eager and trusting sucker.

But as he looked at the globe, the plenipotentiary's expression gradually turned to gloom.

No matter how he approached the problem, there just wasn't a sucker in sight. END

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE SUPER-SLEUTHS OF SCIENCE FICTION

by SAM MOSKOWITZ

Science fictian's favorite historian tells us about the early days of sf detective stories—and who dun it!

Sherlock Holmes died January 6, 1957 of natural causes. His body was discovered on a park bench in Sussex. He was 103 years old.

How had he attained so remarkable an age?

William S. Baring-Gould gets at the secret of the matter in a fascinating biography, *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street* (Clarkson N. Potter, 1962), when he states: "It had seemed strange to some — Watson for one had never understood — why Holmes, after his retirement, should interest himself in beekeeping." Sherlock Holmes, he explains, was experimenting with queen bee royal jelly. This substance, upon which the queen bee is fed exclusively throughout her life span, extends her years 10-fold and more. Holmes discovered, Baring-Gould reports, that "royal jelly, properly prepared and taken, could preserve and prolong the processes of human life."

The scientific speculation that queen bee royal jelly might extend human life appeared first in David H. Keller's story *The Boneless Horror* (SCIENCE WONDER STORIES, July, 1929). "This feed," Dr. Keller said, "the queen jelly, has in it the elements of immortality." Eighteen years later a report in *Time*, Sept. 29, 1947, titled "The Queen's Secret" confirmed Dr. Keller's theory. It told of a paper read hy Thomas S. Gardner, Ph.D. at the convention of The American Chemical Society in Manhattan that year in which he claimed to have isolated the life-extending elements in queen bee royal jelly — pantothenic acid, pyridoxin and bioten — and a diet heavy in those elements had lengthened the life of fruit flies 46% (Later he would almost triple the life span of a guinea pig in a similar experiment.)

Quite appropriately, Thomas S.

Gardner, a science fiction fan and author, had been inspired to take this avenue of scientific research by reading Dr. Keller's story *The Boneless Horror*. There also seems little question that William S. Baring-Gould, an admitted science fiction connoisseur, deduced Sherlock Holmes' interest in raising bees from the same source. That the ingenuity of science fiction authors and readers should be instrumental in prolonging the life of as beloved and valuable a luminary as Sherlock Holmes was no more than fair exchange, considering the efforts made from 1930 on to amalgamate elements of the Holmesian type of mystery story with science fiction.

That Dr. David H. Keller should be the inspirator of the entire thesis was as it should be, for he was also the creator of Taine of San Francisco, the truly popular early scientific detective of the science fiction magazines.

Readers loved the droll and laconic Taine, who, when introducing himself to a prospective client in *Euthanasia Limited* (*Amazing Stories Quarterly*, Fall, 1929) said: "Some weeks ago you asked the Chief of the New York Secret Service to send you a detective that was brilliant and at the same time looked like an imbecile. I am the man. Taine, from San Francisco." A master of disguise, Taine solved that case by posing as an oriental servant, uncovering a device that drained all electrical current from the human body, producing death from no seeming cause.

When the head of Secret Service at Washington, D.C. sends to San Francisco for the best man they have to help him solve the baffling disappearance of 503 college students in *The Cerebral Library* (AMAZING STORIES, May, 1931), Taine arrives.

"I never heard of you," is the disappointed complaint.

"That may be true," Taine replies. "But some of my best work has not been broadcast. I married the Chief's daughter. He likes me. Of course, she does too, but she is busy now, so the old man sent me. Want me?" Taine, again disguised as an oriental, this time a surgeon, cracks the case in time to prevent the transplantation of the brains of the college students into an electronic complex that will form a great information bank.

Taine's last appearance in a science fiction magazine (exclusive of reprints) was in *The Tree of Evil* (WONDER STORIES, Sept., 1934), where he solved the mystery of an entire town that was slowly losing all notions of morality. A non-science fiction Taine story, *Hands of Doom*, appeared in 10-STORY DETECTIVE, Oct., 1947, where he proves that two great bronze praying hands, driven by a mechanism, did not crush the skulls of several victims, but were a decoy to remove attention from the real murderess.

Enough interest was created by his scientific detection to warrant the beginning of a "Scientific Detective Series" of booklets by ARRA Printers, Jamaica, New York, pub-

lishers of the early science fiction fan magazine SCIENCE FICTION DIGEST. *Wolf Hollow Bubbles*, a 6,000-word Taine of San Francisco story concerning cancer cells large enough to engulf a man, was published in May, 1933 and autographed copies were advertised at 10 cents. The action in the story takes place while Taine is still courting his wife. This was the only story issued in the scientific detective series by this press.

The collected stories of Keller's popular little detective (including several never previously published) were announced for hard covers in 1948 by the Hadley Publishing Co., Providence, R.I., under the title *Taine of San Francisco*, but never appeared.

The Taine stories were uneven in quality and loosely constructed. A number of them were not even science fiction. While, on the positive side, they were frequently imaginative, employing humor effectively, their popularity rested on the creation of the character of Taine, who was a standout by any criteria.

A contributing reason for the popularity of the Taine of San Francisco stories was that when Keller wrote one for a *science fiction* magazine, it could qualify by the most stringent definition of the term as part of the genre. Though the publication of Hugo Gernsback's SCIENTIFIC DETECTIVE MONTHLY and AMAZING DETECTIVE TALES had done much to refine the art of the scientific detective story, progress was not continuous, nor was it uniform in all publications. The thinking of the editors of that day was that if a crime is committed or solved through the utilization of established scientific principles, it constituted a legitimate science fiction story, regardless of whether any element of fantasy was present.

Their logic was not shared by their readers. Other than Taine, scientific detective stories enjoyed small popularity, though editors continued to use them.

An example in point was a 10,000-word novelette contributed by popular science fiction author A. Hyatt Verrill to the April, 1930 AMAZING STORIES, titled *The Feathered Detective*. In it, Big Ben, a former sailor and his pet bird, a rare African touraco, are murdered. The touraco is a green bird, whose plumage runs red when wet. The murderer, who has come in out of the rain and wrung the bird's neck with wet hands, is caught by the red stain resulting from the bird's feathers. One otherwise unusual series that perpetuated this flow was written by A. L. Hodges. The first two stories, *The Pea Vine Mystery* and *The Dead Sailor*, both appeared in AMAZING STORIES for May, 1930 and were only 300 and 400 words long respectively. In the first, the man is strangled to death by falling unconscious into fast-growing pea vines, and in the second a sailor is killed by a chance bullet of water. The final story in the series, *The Mystery of Professor Brown* (AMAZING STORIES, August, 1930), stretched to the interminable

length of 600 words. When he inserted his head momentarily into an electrical induction furnace, its action melted a piece of metal in his skull, causing it to drop through his brain.

Of the same order of interest, though much longer in length, was *The Radio Detective* by Lincoln S. Colby (AMAZING STORIES, May, 1931), where interference of a radio set uncovers the fact that a former convict is slowly killing the judge who sentenced him, by sending heavy dosages of X rays through a wall into his bedroom.

Utilizing the same formula, Alfred John Olsen, Jr., a popular science fiction writer of fourth-dimensional stories (better known as Bob Olsen), inaugurated a new series built around the mental wizard Justin Pryor, head of the research department of the advertising firm of Wright and Underwood, with *The Master of Mystery* (AMAZING STORIES, Oct., 1931). In that first story, a man found dead in bed with a crushed skull, in a locked, burglar-proofed room, is discovered to have been killed by the impact of a 30-pound piece of dry ice placed to drop on his head. The evaporation of the ice eliminated the murder weapon. A second story, *Seven Sunstrokes* (AMAZING STORIES, April, 1932), has seven prominent men dying of sunstroke induced by injections of a chemical that makes them overheat when subjected to ultra-violet rays. The third and final story in the series, *The Pool of Death* (AMAZING STORIES, Jan., 1933) may actually be classified as science fiction, since it is discovered that a man who has dived into a swimming pool and is never seen again has been digested by a massive amoeba. All of the stories were long novelettes.

Olsen also had published the first of what appeared to be intended as a new scientific detective series, featuring "The Lone Monogoose," so named "because he's a whiz at hunting and killing snakes." The story, titled *The Crime Crusher* (AMAZING STORIES, June, 1933), was based on a camera that could photograph events up to thirty days *past*.

The greater imagination which Olsen displayed as his stories continued to appear (and the diminution of other scientific detective stories without some note of fantasy) was to a degree forced by magazines and authors outside the science fiction field, among them Erle Stanley Gardner.

Today Erle Stanley Gardner is renowned as the world's best-selling mystery author, having hit the jackpot with Perry Mason. In 1928 he was a hard-working pulpster, no better known for his detectives than he was for his popular westerns.

Stories of the western desert were his particular forte, and at times his western character, Bob Zane, became a desert detective, fortuitously combining two of his creator's strongest talents. Finding himself going stale on westerns, Gardner one day in 1928 outfitted a truck like a camp wagon and struck out across

old prospectors' trails to recharge his plot banks. On the trail, a story that he claims was told him by a prospector gave him the foundation for his first try at science fiction, *Rain Magic* (ARGOSY, Oct. 20, 1928). That story, with its intriguing description of ants that build houses out of little sticks of wood and malevolently bright monkey men, was a noteworthy effort. He didn't stop there, but went on to write a number of others, most of them short novels for ARGOSY, but none was to recapture the special charm of his first.

It was inevitable that he would attempt to incorporate the crime and detective theme into his science fiction, just as he had done in his desert yarns. *A Year in a Day* (ARGOSY, July 1935), was based on a drug that could speed a person's movements up 100 times, enabling a murderer to enter a room filled with people, kill a selected victim before the eyes of all and still remain unseen. In *The Human Zero* (ARGOSY, Dec. 19, 1931), men disappear, leaving all their clothes on the floor, in the arrangement in which they were wearing them. It develops that electrical transmission of temperatures of absolute zero, through powder sprinkled on their hair, has shrunk their cells to the point where they shrivel up and dissipate.

Garrett Smith had written a prophetic harbinger of the use of closed-circuit television to guard against criminals in *"You've Killed Privacy!"* (ARGOSY, July 7, 1928), which was noteworthy, but undoubtedly the crime story in a science fiction setting that created the greatest impact during this period was Murray Leinster's *The Darkness on Fifth Avenue* (ARGOSY, Nov. 30, 1929). In that classic, a criminal discovers the means of plunging any given area into the abyss of impenetrable blackness. Armed with special lenses his men can plunder at will. The efforts of the police force to offset the deprivations of darkness and track down the culprit, involve the use of blind men and the hair-raising driving of police cars down along the grooves of trolley tracks to keep them on the road. In referring to the supplementary crimes committed under the cloak of darkness by people in the darkened area, Leinster also provided graphic sociological comment. *Darkness on Fifth Avenue* was a true detective story, initially submitted to DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY, but the three sequels. *The City of the Blind, The Storm That Had to be Stopped* and *The Man Who Put Out the Sun*, involve an escalation of the scope and effectiveness of the scientific terrors that an evil genius is leveling against mankind, making them primarily tales of mass disaster and only incidentally detective stories.

Leinster would use the detective and scientific invention both in and out of the science fiction magazines. The title *The Sleep Gas* (ARGOSY, Jan 16, 1932) indicates the device employed by the criminal element to achieve their ends; *The Racketeer Ray* (AMAZING STORIES, Feb. 1932) finds the bad guys with a gadget that can draw all metal to them as

well as electrical current; and *The Mole Pirate* (ASTOUNDING STORIES, Nov., 1934), his banner achievement in this vein and one of his finest stories concerning a scientific criminal, ultilizes a ship that can move through the ground as a submarine moves through water.

The foregoing tales of Erle Stanley Gardner and Murray Leinster were actually popularizers and prototypes of a formula involving a criminal genius threatening a city, country or planet with scientific horror and an official or specialized agent battling the menace. This formula would eventually form the entire basis of a magazine like OPERATOR 5 and become a plot bulwark for others such as DOC SAVAGE, THE SPIDER, SECRET AGENT X and even to some degree THE SHADOW. To that extent their influence was even stronger on the pulp magazines as a body than it was on the science fiction magazines specifically.

Exposed to the obvious greater popularity of the more imaginative super scientific mysteries of the class of Erle Stanley Gardner and Murray Leinster, a less reserved plotting was inevitable in detective stories that appeared in the science fiction magazines. As early as 1930, Hugh B. Cave's *The Murder Machine* (ASTOUNDING STORIES OF SUPER-SCIENCE, Sept., 1930) told of the invention of a device by Michael Strange to hypnotize people at long distance and use them as murder tools. Edmond Hamilton's *Space Rocket Murders* (AMAZING STORIES, Oct., 1932), added a somewhat more sophisticated dimension to science fiction, when an investigation to solve a series of deaths of space rocket experimenters (including one named Braun) reveals that disguised Venusians on earth have been attempting to slow down earth's progress in this direction until we become less combative.

Despite his outstanding attempts to popularize the detective story in science fiction with SCIENTIFIC DETECTIVE MONTHLY, Hugo Gernsback had at times been as guilty as AMAZING STORIES in continuing to promote such stories without any true element of fantasy. Several such examples appeared in a group of neatly printed booklets he published titled "The Science Fiction Series" which sold through the mail for 10c each or six for 50c. His June, 1932 WONDER STORIES announced six more titles in the series, No. 17 billed as "two surprises for the lovers of scientific detective mysteries." The first, *The Spectre Bullet* by Thomas Mack, suggested live actors in conjunction with moving pictures and had one of them murdered by a shot that ostensibly came from the screen; the second, *The Avenging Note* by Alfred Sprissler contained nothing more scientific then a concealed poisoned needle, driven by a spring into a woman's finger when she attempted to tune a harp.

Yet it was Gernsback who would again make one more strong effort to give the scientific detective story a respected place in science fiction. Evidence that he would try again came in the blurb of *The Missing*

Hours by Morton Brotman (WONDER STORIES, April, 1935), where he said: "An occasional scientific-detective story is well suited to this magazine, and the present one has much merit and everything that a good detective story should have." The story told of armored truck drivers who arrive at their destination hours late, with no memory of what happened in the lost time, except that their money is gone. Their undoing has been a hypnotic ray quite similar in action to the one in *The Murder Machine* by Hugh B. Cave.

What Gernsback was really up to was revealed in the same issue where it was announced: "*The Waltz of Death* by P. B. Maxon is our new serial starting next month, and we challenge you to show us a more satisfying scientific detective murder mystery." Gernsback was set to gamble on the acceptance of an entire serial novel of scientific detection by science fiction readers, something no one had ever had the courage to attempt before. Conceivably he hoped it might attract a dual audience.

In blurbing the first installment of the serial which appeared in the May, 1935 WONDER STORIES, Gernsback justified his experiment on the grounds "that LIBERTY MAGAZINE, the well-known 'slick' publication, which boasts of the largest magazine circulation, conducted a contest last year in which our present serial, 'The Waltz of Death,' was awarded honorable mention.

"Therefore, we feel justified in calling this story a better example of literature than is usually found in pulp magazines — we might say elite. In truth, we have never read a more absorbing and masterfully constructed scientific murder mystery. It is no ordinary story and falls well within the category of science fiction."

The Waltz of Death, judged by the mystery writing standards of its period, was a superior work. The author catches reader interest in the first few pages where the unexplained death of a young, healthy man sitting in an easy chair in full view of a number of people is graphically described. This occurred with nothing more sinister than a piano recital of a Brahms waltz in progress. There was no mark on him, but a box of aspirins in his pocket had gone up in a puff of white powder like a miniature blast.

Interest is sustained as an autopsy reveals that the dead man's insides are badly torn, as if from an internal explosion. The story concludes, after some 60,000 words of mystery, as a legitimate work of science fiction. The murderer turns out to be the pianist who is also a scientist. He has been working on exploding the atom by the use of vibrations. He has succeeded in getting a limited explosion from the atoms in aspirin through repetition and build-up of certain sound dissonances. When he notes that a guest, who has inadvertently caused the death of the girl he loved, has taken three aspirins, he elaborately builds up the proper sound dissonances on the piano until the aspirins explode in-

ternally, accomplishing his purpose.

Hugo Gernsback has been unjustly maligned as favoring a very rigid format in science fiction. This is primarily the result of his rigid statements of policy, but his publishing record does not bear them out. To the contrary it reveals that he published the widest variety of science fiction of any editor in the history of the field. *The Waltz of Death* was a good story of its type, though an extremely bad story for Hugo Gernsback to have published in 1935.

That was the year when his magazine WONDER STORIES was fading under the competition of the "thought variant" story policies of the field-leading ASTOUNDING STORIES, edited by F. Orlin Tremaine. Readers were being fed an exciting diet of far-out themes, treatments and handlings of science fiction. By contrast, British reader Sidney L. Birchby was right in complaining of *The Waltz of Death*: "It was the slowest waltz I've known. On and on for three months, taking up half the magazine. A marathon dance?"

The mystery of what happened to the author of *The Waltz of Death* was to prove more baffling than that posed in the story. P. B. Maxon's agent was the late Ed Bodin, a very close friend of F. Orlin Tremaine, Bodin had shown him the story first, but was correctly told that while a creditable mystery it didn't fit in with the dynamic presentation of ideas that was building ASTOUNDING STORIES at the time. Tremaine suggested WONDER STORIES (inadvertently hurting his competition, which would sell out to Standard Magazines after its April, 1936 number). WONDER STORIES paid on publication, so many months passed between the time the story was first submitted and the check received by the agent and forwarded to the author. The envelope containing the check was returned with the information: "no such party at this address." Notices in the writer's magazines produced no results.

When interest was expressed by Arcadia House, Inc. in putting the novel in hard covers under their Mystery House imprint, Ed Bodin managed to get a spot on Dave Elman's radio program "Contact" which specialized in appeals to locate people who had money coming to them. On Oct. 12, 1940, 9:30 p.m., Ed Bodin described the details of his dilemma and asked anyone with information to get in touch with him. No reply was forthcoming.

F. Orlin Tremaine, in taking up the editorship of Bartholomew House, a paperback offshoot of McFadden Publications during World War II, remembered the novel, actually placing it into soft covers under the imprint of "A Bart House Mystery" in 1944.

A trip to the last place of residence by Bodin finally disclosed that the author, P. B. Maxon, had dropped dead in a rented room the very night he finished and mailed the manuscript to the agent!

The poor reaction by the readership of WONDER STORIES to the publication of *The Waltz of Death* was not lost on the field. Sci-

entific detective stories in science fiction magazines became infrequent — and unpublicized.

Outside the science fiction field an interesting series by Ray Cummings, who had on occasion done scientific detective stories in the past, ran in *Detective Fiction Weekly*. The first one, titled *Crimes of the Year* 2,000 (May 11, 1935), was more a catalog of futuristic devices to be employed by crime fighters of tomorrow than a story: a bloodhound machine, electric eavesdropper, phonographic wrist voice recorder, helicopter air patrols, all contributing toward trapping a criminal bent on stealing $4 million in platinum from The Great Circle Flyer due from England. Gadgetry diminished in the second story, *The Television Alibi* (July 20, 1935), built around a love triangle focussed on a female television entertainer. There were six stories in all, the last, *The Case of the Frightened Death*, appearing in the July 24, 1937 DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY.

The first story in the series, while poor fiction, was on the right track as far as underscoring that crime detection of the future would involve a complex assortment of devices, not merely a single gadget which would serve as a detection panacea. The later stories in the series strongly suggested that advances in psychological knowledge would also play a role in tomorrow's criminology. Cummings by 1935 had already gone into an almost hopeless story telling and stylistic decline, but his work still contained useful lessons for the openminded writer.

The value of a full supply of modern gadgetry was not lost on Ed Earl Repp (science fiction writer discovered by Hugo Gernsback in 1929), whose "laboratory sleuth" John Hale carried with him (in addition to a gun) a kit which included a spectroscopic pistol which "shot" refracted light onto a photographic plate, instantly revealing its elemental components; an electroscope for detecting radioactivity; one camera with fast film and a second with infra-red film and a thermometer which registered automatically both the high and low temperature of any object it came in contact with.

He used all of these to solve the appearance of a frigid apparition in *The Scientific Ghost* (AMAZING STORIES, Jan, 1939), created through the use of "frozen light."

John Hale was carried through five adventures in AMAZING STORIES, all competently written on a fast-action pulp level and all terribly hackneyed in plot but creditably imaginative scientifically. Their popularity, however, never rose above "filler" status in the eyes of the reader.

The issue that carried the initial John Hale story also included *I, Robot* by Eando Binder, the mechanical man who provided inspiration for such masters as Isaac Asimov and Clifford D. Simak. The device of a robot had been used many times before as the agent of a criminal, but in a later story in the series, *Adam Link, Robot Detective* (AMAZING STORIES, May, 1940), Binder employed him for the first time in the tradition of Sherlock

Holmes. Adam Link's attempts to bring to justice those who have committed the murders his metal mate Eve Link is accused of probably laid the seed in the mind of Isaac Asimov for the creation of R. Daneel Olivaw, the highly involved robot sleuth of *The Caves of Steel* and *The Naked Sun.*

To many authors, the solution of crime in a science fiction setting was little more than a tongue-in-cheek literary toy. Malcolm Jameson in *Murder in the Time World* (AMAZING STORIES, Aug., 1940) has the murderer send the corpse into the future in a time machine to get rid of it, and follows only to find the police of tomorrow will have laid a trap for him; John York Cabot (pen name of David Wright O'Brien) in *Murder in the Past* (AMAZING STORIES, March, 1941) sends a man into the past in a time vehicle to kill a friend who will betray him on the basis that "prevention is better than vengeance."

The most remarkable group of stories to rise out of this experimentation were those built around John Carstairs, Botanical Detective. Whether it is in tracking down a diamond plant (which eats carbon and excretes diamonds) denizen of Uranus, stolen from The Interplanetary Botanical Gardens in the United States in his first story *Plants Must Grow* (THRILLING WONDER STORIES, October, 1941) or using plants to capture criminals as in *Snapdragon* (THRILLING WONDER STORIES, Dec., 1941,) all the cases contrived by Author Frank Belknap Long involve his detective's specialty.

Six of the eight stories in the series, including the final novel *The Hollow World* (STARTLING STORIES, Summer, 1945), where John Carstairs strains his botanical talents to best an entire plant kingdom on the newly discovered 12th planet, were collected into a book titled *John Carstairs, Space Detective* (Frederick Fell, 1949). Highly original conceptions of interplanetary plant life are thrown at the reader with a fecundity which is admirable. However, the stories were written at fast pulp tempo and stretches of awkward writing (from a man who is generally a superior stylist) as well as careless plotting, tend to give the collection a teenage cast.

One of the stories, in this otherwise offbeat series, *Plants Must Slay* (THRILLING STORIES, April, 1942) in which John Carstairs must contend with an invisible plant that murders humans with a gun, was included in *The Saint's Choice of Impossible Crime,* ghost-edited for Leslie Charteris by Oscar J. Friend and published in paperback by Bond-Charteris Enterprises, Los Angeles, 1945. The collection, the first of its type, was an acknowledgment that random scientific detective stories were again arousing interest. Included, in addition to Long, was the inevitable Simon Templar novelette about a criminal who had a process for making synthetic gold and how The Saint, true to his title, resisted the temptation to appropriate the method, in *The Gold Standard* by Leslie Charteris (taken

from *The Saint and Mr. Teal*, Doubleday, 1933). Just as inevitably, the two best stories in the collection were not even crime stories, and only by a stretch of the imagination could it be said that a crime was even committed: *The Impossible Highway* by Oscar J. Friend and *Trophy* by Henry Kuttner.

However, represented in the anthology was Fredric Brown, an outstanding writer of crime stories, with *Daymare*—"a mystery novel of the future" (THRILLING WONDER STORIES, Fall, 1943) — where Rod Caquer, of the Callisto police, solves a murder in the best modern tradition and in the process foils a plot to enslave the minds of mankind. This story represented the entrance into the scientific detective field of a crack professional capable of homogenizing both the detective story and the science fiction story into an acceptable blend.

There would eventually be other anthologies of scientific detective stories revealing those whose interests straddled both fields. *The Science-Fictional Sherlock Holmes*, edited and published in hard covers by Robert C. Peterson, Colorado, 1960, contained stories by Anthony Boucher, Mack Reynolds and August W. Derleth, Poul Anderson and Gordon Dickson, and H. Beam Piper and John J. McGuire, all from science fiction magazines and all pastiches of Sherlock Holmes. A paperback collection, SPACE, TIME & CRIME, edited by Miriam Allen DeFord (Paperback Library, 1954) included an inordinate number of pastiches, but had also a good representation of serious scientific detective stories.

Inspirator and godfather to the two later anthologies was Anthony Boucher. One of the nation's leading mystery story critics and a distinguished writer in that field, his remarkable mystery novel *Rocket To the Morgue*, under the pen name of H. H. Holmes (Duell, Sloan and Pierce, 1942), dealt with the murder of the son of one of the world's greatest science fiction writers. The reading of this mystery by the uninitiate would provide an insight into the world of science fiction as well as an appraisal of the science fiction authors and their fans. The book was appropriately dedicated to "The Manana Literary Society and in particular for Robert Heinlein and Cleve Cartmill." Mack Reynolds would produce a mystery novel of a similar stripe for Phoenix Press in 1951, *The Case of the Little Green Men*, which contained a fascinating melange of material about the science fiction world.

As might be expected with such influential enthusiasts, the scientific detective story began to appear with increasing frequency and more often than not was written with professional competency. What could not be anticipated was that its practitioners would actually achieve the "impossible." The "impossible", in this case, was the creation of a valid detective story that was at the same time a true science fiction story. Boucher made references to this challenge in *Rocket to the Morgue*, when he referred to an author he

believes has succeeded at this task: "Don's (John W. Campbell), always maintained that a science fiction story was by definition impossible, but wait till you read that one."

Boucher would go on to edit THE MAGAZINE *of* FANTASY *and* SCIENCE FICTION, but ironically, it was Campbell that published the first of the great masterpieces that science fiction was to produce in this vein, *Needle* by Hal Clement, a two-part novel beginning in ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION for May, 1949. In that novel, an alien detective is chasing an alien criminal through space and both ships crash on earth. The aliens are symbiotes that must live within another creature. The problem of the Hunter, the space detective, is to discover *which* of the billions of humans is host to his quarry. The plot and its development was then as unique to science fiction as it was to the detective story.

Still another competing editor, Horace L. Gold, was to reap the harvest of the seeds of Boucher's literary faith in a brilliantly written novel of murder in the future, *The Demolished Man* by Alfred Bester (GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION, Jan., 1952), based on a man who tries to get away with murder in a society where the law enforcement agents employ espers who can *read minds*. The truly powerful theme, rendered in a verbal frenzy rhetorically as startling as must have been the first exhibition of the dance steps of The Charlston, created an instantaneous and deserved reputation for Bester.

The second achievement of GALAXY in the scientific detection of tomorrow was the most inspired of all. It was written by Isaac Asimov, who had previously built two reputations in science fiction, one with his robot stories and the three laws of robotics and the second with his Foundation series of the galactic empire.

The Caves of Steel (GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION, Oct., Nov., Dec., 1953) is the supreme masterpiece to date of the detective story in science fiction, so much so that it has received mention in at least one important book on the development of crime fiction. As story background, eight billion people of earth live in steel labyrinths and 50 underpopulated worlds of the galaxy are attempting, unsuccessfully, to recruit colonists in face of an anti-progressive trend. In this setting, the detective Lije Baley, assigned the task of solving a murder with interstellar implications, is given as an assistant a robot, R. Daneel Olivaw, who he fears is out to replace him. Bizarre and novel, it is a fine job.

A sequel, *The Naked Sun* (ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION Oct., Nov., Dec., 1965), where the same pair solve an unlikely murder on a world where people are repelled by personal contact and conduct their business by television, presented a fascinating situation.

The detective in science fiction in broadening his range to the entire galaxy affirmed for the science fiction author the old axiom: "The difficult we can do right away, the impossible just takes a little longer!"

END

LIKE ANY WORLD OF GREE

by C. C. MacAPP

Illustrated by LUTJENS

It was a slave planet, like any other enslaved by Gree—but it happened to be named "Earth"!

I

Steve Duke regained consciousness and stared up into a long, protuberant-jawed face wearing daubs of olive-green paint and an expression that seemed to he glum, introspective, anxious and curious, all at the same time.

He decided its owner was human. This *was* Earth, and there *were* men standing around. But the lanky, flat-chested frame might alter his concept of the range of humanness. He sat up, wincing; he'd evidently humped his head pretty well in landing. "Where's my air-car?"

"We carried you a ways. Can you walk?"

Steve hauled himself to his feet.

"Of course! But the aircar's got to be—"

"It's been taken care of." The man thrust forward drab-green coveralls and a beret. "Get into these, quick."

Scowling, Steve shucked off his own clothes and squirmed into the coveralls. There was nothing he could do but hope these were actually the partisans he was supposed to meet.

He let them daub his face, and accepted the stubby airgun they thrust into his hands. He followed them, grimly enduring the throb in his head. When they'd gone a little way, the leader said, "We're hunting bear, understand? They've been killing calves. If we're stopped, don't speak unless you have to."

Steve nodded. He wasn't used to being treated like a novice, but this was no time to squabble.

They were climbing a small rounded mountain, thin-soiled, with crumbling shale exposed in places, but fairly densely grown with scrubby little trees that his briefing had called 'manzanita'. He stooped like his guides to stay hidden. The sun was warm on his back, and the air had a musky smell that was associated with autumn on many worlds he'd known.

At the top they paused, watching for aircars. There were none in sight. The lanky man and one other took Steve down toward a ravine choked with taller trees, which smelled peppery. A man appeared, gestured, and slipped out of sight. They got among the trees and waited.

Another man came, carrying a small recording televiewer, and handed it to the leader, who started it and hung it in the shade where Steve could watch its screen.

The view was a long-range one of his aircar, where he'd crash-landed. A man, wearing trousers and shirt of plain gray, a straw hat and what looked in the picture like civilized work-shoes, peered at the wreck. Presently he approached it, leaned over the rail and worked at something. Then he lifted out four bundles. Steve relaxed a little. Those would be his message-drones and a few other things he needed.

The man hurried away, out of the picture. In a minute the wreck vanished in dust and debris and flame.

Steve grunted in satisfaction. No evidence now of the car's origin off-planet.

The partisan leader said, "This next happened while you were still unconscious."

The next view was longer-range, showing only a slope with a dark object moving above it. The object swooped down and hovered. There was a terrific explosion at ground level. When the screen cleared, the dot was gone.

Steve's headache seemed to get worse. Limply, he sat down with his back against a tree. "I'm sorry. Who was the man?"

The leader sat down too, folding his long legs. "He had incurable cancer anyway. That's why he was picked. At least he took a couple Slobs with him. Too bad about your equipment. Does it matter much?"

Steve grinned sourly. "Quite a lot, maybe. I'll have to explain a little about space travel, and this situation. To get any distance at all in a reasonable time, you have to null. You might think of that as sidetracking space. If you know accurately the co-ordinates of your destination, you can get fairly close in one hop. But fairly close means you still have to make smaller hops to zero in, then, finally, run in slowly in normal space.

"There are ways to save time. One way is to gamble on a closer hop. But if it doesn't come out right, and you hit a spot with more than a few molecules of matter per cubic yard, you can't come out of null, and you might get lost."

"Another way is to have big steel tanks at each end that can be pumped down to a hard vacuum, plus apparatus for zeroing in. That's called a link. You know about the Null Center here?" At the other's nod he went on. "Because there's a general space war on, a Gree-occupied planet like this has a secret spot somewhere, maybe twenty light-years away, for the other end of a link. If my side—Effogus—knew where that was, it could be knocked out." He paused. The next part wasn't going to make him popular. "I'll be blunt. This is like any other world of Gree. From a galactic viewpoint, one planet doesn't count much. We're going to chase the Gree empire out of this little volume of space. When the Gree command sees it's licked here, it'll destroy all livable planets so we can't use them. Earth will be one."

There was a murmur from the six men who'd gathered around. One said, "They destroy the *whole world?*"

Steve tried not to smile. "Two or three hundred worlds, probably. Oh, the hulks will be here. In a thousand years, maybe, Earth will be ready to replant."

The lanky leader unfolded his legs and stood up. "What's this null link got to do with it?" His face was hard but calm.

Steve said, "They don't keep killer bombs on each planet. Too dangerous, and it would tie up too many. If they decide they've lost Earth, they'll evacuate their important people through the link, then send in bombs from the other end."

There was a growl from the men, which the leader silenced with a hand. "All right. Why does that depend on the stuff we lost for you?"

"Because," Steve said, "my job here—besides getting you to make a diversion at the right moment—is to find out where the other end of the link is, and get word to my side. I've got a squadron of Scout ships hidden fairly near the Solar System. I would have sent the information by miniature message drones I had. Now . . ."

There was a silence. Finally the tall man said, "Is there any other way you can get a message out?"

Steve got to his feet too; he didn't feel comfortable sitting, with so many glares on him. "Possibly. Getting into the Null Center and getting the data was going to be the hardest part, anyway. If I can do that, maybe I can steal a message drone, or

something. I know Gree equipment pretty well."

One of the men said savagely, "Hell, we'd be better off turning you in!"

Steve gave him only a glance. "It wouldn't make any difference. Gree's already cooked, so far as this area's concerned. The only reason my side sent me is to give me a chance to save this planet. And only because it's the original human world."

The tall leader turned and stared away for a minute. When he turned back his face was composed. "We'll work with you as agreed. Will your side still wait, now?"

"Probably," Steve said, "but not beyond the set time."

The leader spat. "All right. Let's get on with it. By the way, my name's Ben Rutledge."

II

The town of which Rutledge was mayor (as a cover-up for his partisan activities) was called Lovelock.

Steve and Rutledge approached it on foot. It nestled in the late afternoon shadow of the mountains. To the east, green level farmland stretched. A broad concrete highway ran straight east, and, in the other direction entered a tunnel that must run clear through the mountains. A single large ground vehicle (Steve reminded himself to call them "trucks") left town as they watched, headed east, stacked high with wooden boxes of something. Its engine was noisy.

The town consisted of perhaps a thousand dwellings, plus retail stores, stock pens, warehouses, the truck terminal and a small landing field upon which rested several light planes. Ground cars, smaller than the truck but nearly as noisy, moved about. But there were as many or more horse-drawn wagons, and there were no other paved roads than the highway. In general, things puzzled Steve. He knew Gree used Earth as a breeding and a supply world—the volume of food and simple artifacts that spaced out from here was huge —but there was no sign of regimentation or of Gree technology, which might have increased the volume still more. Maybe Gree found the Earth population of a little under two billion more tractable this way.

And as they walked into town, he felt that was it. People worked or moved about at an unhurried but steady pace. They seemed well-fed and comfortably, if simply, clothed, and contented. It contrasted with the patrol ships which, he knew, roved just above atmosphere listening for illegal radio transmissions, armed and ready.

They went to Rutledge's office, in the second (and top) floor of the town hall, and sat without turning on the lights. Rutledge pointed out one of the light planes on the airfield. "That's yours. It's got a grav drive in it, a gadget I don't understand. They're only given out to people specially favored by the Occupation. You're specially favored. Your name's Ralph Parr, and you're a bounty hunter. You hunt people as well as animals, for the Occupa-

tion, sometimes. People don't like you much, but most of them don't dare cross you. I've got some notes you can study, but you haven't been seen around this part of the country much. You've just settled in town."

"All right," Steve said. "What about the real Ralph Parr?"

"You don't have to worry about him."

Steve nodded, then asked bluntly, "How did you happen to become a rebel?"

Rutledge tilted back his chair and sat for a minute toying with a pencil and staring at it. "One of my wives wanted to keep her baby. She took to the woods with it. They found her and took the baby, and executed her in public."

Steve let the silence last a while. He'd never made even a semi-permanent attachment to any one woman, but he could understand it, more or less. After a while he asked, "Is polygamy common here?"

Rutledge looked at him. "With most of the boy babies taken when they're a year old? Of course. What's left is breeding stock, and that means polygamy. Aren't humans bred on other worlds?"

"Several thousand," Steve told him, "but they're not run like Earth. Then there are a couple hundred worlds voluntarily allied with Effogus, my side, but those don't supply many men and monogamy's the rule. Don't people here resent having their babies taken?"

"A few do. Most swallow their resentment, if any. A woman pools her children with the other wives, even with more than one family, and they're raised on a loose community basis. Most of the girl babies are left; then, there are the boys with congenital defects. Such as me. I guess they could tell I was going to be too long-coupled."

"I see," Steve said. "And people aren't bitter about anything else? The stalled technology and economy, for instance?"

Rutledge shook his head, then let his chin sink moodily on his flat chest. "That was another thing I saw differently after they killed my wife. The whole damned jumble of propaganda looks sickening to me now. But people swallow it with a smile. And most'll turn their best friends in for a disloyal remark, or for reading a pre-Occupation book."

Steve said, "I'm afraid I'll have to pester you with a lot of questions about things like that. But maybe you ought to turn me over to someone else. You're too important to risk; and if you have a family to worry about . . ."

Rutledge shook his head. "No more. I decided not to father any more cattle. And I want to work with you first-hand, and see that things are done right."

III

Ralph Parr had evidently been successful at his trade. He had a comfortable bank balance, all the clothes he could use, a selection of weapons, binoculars and such, and the airplane.

The plane-drive was the small grav unit Rutledge had mentioned. It was

a type familiar to Steve, weighing less than twelve pounds, but powerful enough to lift plane, pilot and half a ton of cargo (which might include a captive or a corpse) straight up, slowly; or, directed rearward, give the plane a forward speed of over two hundred miles per hour. It was the only Gree technology about the plane, which was otherwise simply a very good glider. It had a glider's slim lines, and simple controls.

The day after his arrival, Steve took a flight to get acquainted with the plane and the country around Lovelock. He lifted from the village, made a clumsy turn toward the mountains and discovered that the downdraft there wasn't helpful. He found neutral air and rose higher, to drift in lazy circles.

The range of mountains ran roughly north and south. Atop them, every mile or so, were long sheds with multiple antennas above them. Moisture precipitators, he decided. They evidently provided for a strip of farmland about twenty-five miles wide. Beyond that, the land was virtual desert, with only a few isolated hills bearing manzanita. The rest was dry flat, with only scattered brush and grass, or bare alkaline waste.

He drifted north along a dirt road, watching a wagon drawn by four horses and loaded with crates of produce. The driver, after one look up, ignored him. The farmhouses were simple, but all of them had TV antennas. He flew over a larger building with a side-road leading to it and children playing about it, who stared up at him and shouted. He wondered if the teachers in it were Terran.

A little farther along he saw a motor-driven tractor pulling a gang plow. It was as noisy as the trucks.

He swung east, leaving the horizon. What he wanted, now that he had the feel of the airplane, was a look (not a close one, yet) at the Occupation headquarters beyond the mountains. He glanced at the few lights on his panel. A green one; that meant Gree radar or a patrol ship above was tracking him and identified the airplane. An amber light which meant his drive unit was okay and had plenty of stored power. A white light—radio equipment in good order.

Movement on the ground off to one side caught his eye. A herd of wild horses was galloping away from him.

He swung down, fascinated by the actuality of what he'd only read about in books rescued along with his ancestors. There was a grandeur in the beasts that a many-times-more-powerful machine didn't have.

The mountains loomed ahead, with another green strip this side of them. He climbed easily, in the updraft, and crossed over. The upper heights bore evergreens, and there were many small lakes. Again there were moisture precipitators along the summit. He slanted down the eastern slopes and across another green strip.

The flat beyond this range of mountains was higher than Lovelock, and more fertile. There were great herds of cattle grazing. Once—away from any village or farm—he

saw a herd that he suddenly recognized as bison. Not far from them, a band of men on horses dashed for timber as soon as they saw the plane. Those were probably outlaws who'd been intending to kill a bison for meat.

Another fifteen minutes of climbing again brought him within sight of a sprawling metropolis ahead. He banked to the right, wondering if he ought to go much closer. But he'd already wandered too far. The green light on his panel turned red and a blurred voice came from a small grill. "You in the plane. Are you Ralph Parr?"

He set the craft to hover. "Yes."

"What are you doing in this area? You belong three hundred miles west."

He let sullenness enter his voice. "I have clearance to search. I heard a rumor that a band of outlaws was around here."

"Your present contract is not to hunt outlaws."

"No, sir. The rumor was that my quarry might have joined them."

"That is an unlikely notion. Land on the nearest clear spot and wait for us."

He sighed. "Yes, sir."

The Gree patrol ship was a standard Scout, cylinder-shaped, three sections coupled together. It settled down from the stratosphere and landed near Steve. A hatch in the near end opened and one of the Overseer race stepped out, followed by two B'lant slaves—humanoids with features even blunter than the Overseer's, and thick tough hairless gray skins. The Overseer approached and said, "Bare your arm."

Steve half-shucked his coveralls. The alien ran a small instrument against the inside of Steve's left biceps. Steve tried not to show his anxiety. The faked electronic imprint might not get by. But the Overseer glanced at dials and put the instrument away. "Ralph Parr, your quarry could not have gotten across the mountains so soon."

Steve said, "There was word of a pregnant woman and two men, riding horses. I thought I'd better check it out while it was still fresh."

The Overseer raised his left hand and spoke into a wrist communicator, his voice too low to hear. A faint reply came from the instrument. There was a short exchange, then the alien lowered his arm and sighed. "Special Contacts says it's just possible. Why didn't you get clearance? You've brought us all the way down to check on you."

Steve dropped his eyes to the ground. "I didn't have access to a directional radio beam, and—"

"All right; all right. Be sure you catch her."

On the way back he went a little farther north and followed up a river. Along it on each side were farms, and, farther from it, livestock ranches. Then, when he was over foothills, he saw the first rehabilitation camp.

There was an outer fence, simple, but surely serving as a detector system. The area enclosed must be fifty square miles or more. At intervals inside the fence were manned outposts, arranged to have line-of-sight

from one to the next. Near the center of the area, in a fork of the river, was the camp. It was a circle of buildings, forming a closed defense system, with the vital functions inside. He got the impression that vigilance was lax.

At various places, parties of the convalescent slaves were out hunting or hiking or just sunning themselves. Most of them were human. There was a sprinkling of B'lant, and a few tall, slender, blue-skinned humanoids called Sabrils. And, in a full fourth of the area, sectioned off, were Overseers and their families, with their own smaller circle of buildings.

Higher in the foothills was another camp, like the first one except that there were no Overseers (beyond, probably, one or two in charge) but more B'lant. He knew there were other camps scattered about the area, but he was ostensibly only following up the river, so he didn't go look at them. He noted that there were no roads leading to them, and that only one grav ship had been parked on stand-by at each of the two he did see. The Occupation, then, didn't expect any trouble from Terrans, and was prepared to evacuate only Overseers on instant's notice.

Ben Rutledge sat moodily, stretching his legs out under his desk. "It's too bad you went so far. They'll be suspicious. Well, we've made preparations. You'd better close out the contract you're working on." He leaned forward, scribbled on a bit of paper. "Memorize this."

Steve read, "James Guayal. Banyon's Corners Garage." He looked up. "Is it on the map?"

Rutledge nodded as he crumpled the paper. "Half a day's flight northeast. He'll have a corpse for you. He's the electrician at the garage. Don't trust anyone else in town. If you run into trouble, get word to him."

Steve said, "A *corpse*?"

Rutledge eyed him. "Would you rather turn in a live woman?"

"No," Steve said, "not if a corpse will do. It's your arrangement."

IV

The country around Banyon's Corners was rugged. On what flat land existed, the farming and ranching was like that around Lovelock, except that many dirt roads were needed to connect them. There were large areas with no farming and no roads.

The town was small, and the one-story garage near the landing field wasn't hard to spot. Steve let himself down to a roof landing, climbed out of the plane and took the stairway. Below, a plump man with a short cigar clenched between bad teeth walked over. "Help you?"

Steve said, "A little trouble with my ignition."

The man removed the cigar, called out, "Jim!", replaced the cigar and said around it, "He'll help you." A slender man was ambling over.

Guayal was shorter than Steve, dark with neatly kept hair and neat hands. He was polite. "May I help you, sir?"

"Ignition trouble," Steve said. "I'm on the roof."

The slight man stood aside for Steve to precede him. On the roof Steve said casually, "Are you James Guayal? A man named Rutledge recommended you."

The dark eyes flicked a glance. "I'm Guayal. We can talk up here if we keep our voices down." He bent over the plane's rail and unfastened zip-screws.

Steve told him, "A matter of a corpse."

Guayal's head raised a little; bent down again. "I'll have to draw you a map. I'll bring up some tools." He straightened up and started for the stairs.

Presently he returned with a toolbox. He climbed into the cockpit and spread a white cloth on the seat beside him. Opening a can of dark-colored paste soldering flux, he used it to make lines on the cloth. "Due east of town about four miles, then a mile and a half north of that. There's a wooded hill shaped like a kidney bean, with a dry creekbed curving around the inner curve. Near the western end, a hundred yards or so up the slope from the creek, there's a small round spot you can put down in. Just wait. It may take a while for our people to get to you." He glanced at his wristwatch. "The spot'll be in shade in another two hours."

"Fine," Steve said. "What's a kidney bean shaped like?"

Guayal looked startled, then said, "Oh." He added to the sketch. When Steve nodded, the electrician folded the cloth and scrubbed it against itself. Then he probed around behind the panel for a few minutes, replaced it and climbed from the plane. "I think that'll take care of it, sir."

Steve waited in the small clearing. He wasn't nervous; on some Patrol ship's monitor board, a blip would merely show him as parked near town.

Two men dressed as hunters and carrying airguns appeared and stood watching him silently. He slid open the canopy. "I heard there was a corpse here somewhere."

They looked at him a little oddly for a moment, then the older of them said, "Get out and come with us."

Steve didn't like the situation. Both guns were still held ready, though not obviously so. There was an Earth-made pistol in his hip pocket—a compact flat automatic that would shoot slim high-velocity bullets—and clamped in the plane was an air rifle like the ones trained on him, loaded with anesthetic needles. He could hardly reach either weapon. He said, "I haven't much time. How about the corpse?"

"We'll load it," the spokesman said, "but we don't want you to see the men who do it."

He shrugged and climbed from the plane.

Uphill a little ways was a crude canvas tent. Near it were embers of a fire. The younger of the two men said. "Too bad you're late for chow. None left." Steve said it didn't matter. After that there wasn't much talk.

In about twenty minutes the

spokesman said, "The body'll be loaded by now." They escorted him back to the plane, stood silently watching him leave.

He headed south, the general direction of Occupation HQ, but as soon as he was over wild country he found a bare knoll and landed. He wanted to check a couple of things.

They'd given him a corpse, all right, and it sickened him a little. It was a young woman, very pregnant, and something had been eating at her face—or it looked like that.

He closed the hatch, stood thinking for a minute, then opened a smaller hatch that gave access to the drive unit.

He'd guessed right. They'd rigged it so his unit would run wild and explode before long. It was a crude arrangement—a powerful spring ready to drive a pin into a nearly-drilled-through hole in the casing, held back by a wire that passed through a short length of glass tubing, corked at both ends, filled with a liquid that was eating the wire. But it would work.

He closed the hatch, got his air rifle from the plane, set the controls for a gentle climb, and sent the plane away. Then he started walking toward Banyon's Corners

He was terse with Guayal. "I don't know whether you're involved or not, but you'd better get in touch with Rutledge. He'll tell you that if anything happens to me, you won't be worrying *whose* wife is pregnant, or what happens to her."

The dark eyes flashed, but Guayal said nothing for a moment. Then, "I have no idea who tried to kill you and I don't care. It will be dangerous to radio Rutledge."

Steve told him, "It'll be more dangerous not to. That's not a threat, it's a statement of fact."

Guayal looked at him hotly for a moment, then made a small shrug. "Where will I find you?"

"Nowhere. I'll find *you*, tomorrow morning."

In the morning Guayal was sullen, but restrained. "I'm to co-operate with you at any cost."

"Don't take it so personally," Steve grinned. "First of all, you'd better find out who bugged my plane."

"What difference does it make?"

"This difference. The patrol will be nosing around. You were the last person to work on my plane, officially."

Guayal met his eyes coldly. "So you expect me to turn informer?"

Steve said, "Think of it this way. Who's more important to your organization — him or you?"

The electrician almost sneered. "You tell me. You seem to know a lot about it."

"All right, I will. You seem to co-operate with Rutledge. He doesn't. As far as I'm concerned, you're less expendable."

The slight man's expression shifted through anger, then unwillingness, then despair. "At least, I'm going to warn whoever it was. Give him a running chance."

Steve told him, "That's between you and Rutledge. But be *very* careful."

"I will. Anything else?"

"Yes. Find out where the crash was, and get me near it. Then have somebody plant a used parachute somewhere around."

V

A few days later, Steve, unshaved and dirty, must have looked convincingly like a man who'd hiked in through rough country from a crash. For the Patrol, after a brief questioning, let him stay overnight at a Terran hotel and arranged for an aircar to pick him up the next day and take him to Occupation HQ for further questioning. Which suited him very well.

The aircar was much faster than his plane. Before noon the next day it was hovering over HQ, waiting its turn to land. That gave him a chance for a quick scrutiny of the area.

The Terran city stretched for miles. That wasn't surprising since it was by far the biggest manufacturing center on the planet. But what he was interested in was the rectangle at one edge of town.

The rectangle (which comprised the outer defense perimeter enclosing all of HQ) was perhaps a mile north and south by half a mile wide. Approximately in its center was a square, less than a quarter-mile on a side, enclosed by an inner defense perimeter.

North of the square was a compound with many buildings closely spaced. Steve presumed this was the place from which Terrans, including babies, were shipped off-planet. South of the square, closer to his hovering transportation, were rows of barracks and a few other buildings, divided among several compounds. One of these was undoubtedly the compound for transient slaves; another, with a more permanent look about it, for the Center's slave personnel. There were med buildings, mess halls, gyms and theaters.

East of the square were administration buildings and such, and a large area devoted to Overseer's bungalows and bachelor quarters. That area was beautifully landscaped, with artificial lakes and scattered parks.

West of the square and stretching the whole length of the outer rectangle were landing areas; one each for the square and the compounds at either side of it. There were dozens of ships of all sizes parked there, with a few arriving or departing. There were also ships inside the square itself, though at the moment none were active.

The square itself was the important thing.

A way in from its eastern fence was a row of five very large buildings, square, with huge doors facing the middle of the square. Wide-spaced rails led from each. A large transport stood ready on each of the sets of rails, and atop each building was another stand-by transport, ready to lift and settle onto the rails. Between the row of large buildings and the fence were three powerhouses and various service sheds. On the opposite side of the square were five hangars, giving the ground plan a balance. At various places were

mess halls, med buildings and whatnot. The two largest, other than the five null buildings and the hangars, were at the south end of the square —an administration building, with the operations tower atop it, and a communications building sprouting an array of antennas and radar dishes. There was one gate in the middle of each side of the square, with an Inquisition Booth beside each one. A guard tower was set at each corner of the square. There were more guard towers, of course, along the sides of the outer rectangle.

Ground vehicles and air cars moved here and there.

His own transportation was landing now, just outside the southern end of the rectangle. He was escorted from the landing, past some buildings marked 'Public Relations', and to a gate in the rectangle's fence. He was passed in and taken to a building just beyond. Over the entrance was a sign, 'Special Contacts'.

He waited in a large room on the third floor, where four human but non-Terran guards loafed on stand-by, and where two Terrans were already waiting. These latter were called one at a time into an office. Eventually it was Steve's turn.

There were three desks in the office, one occupied by a slave Communications Tech, the other two by Overseers. One of the latter, his broad features worked into a fair imitation of a human smile, said "I am Commander Lekkess. You have met Captain Broa before, I think." He got up to pass one of the electronic coders-and-readers over Steve's upper arm, pretending it was a mere formality. Then he offered a chair.

Broa said, "It has been a long time since your last visit, Mr. Parr. And you have shaved off your beard."

Rutledge's notes had equipped Steve for this. "Yes; over a year. I shaved off the beard because too many people knew me."

Lekkess said, "Excuse us a moment, please." He picked up a paper on his desk as if it were something unrelated to Steve but urgent, and pretended to read from it briefly. He said to Broa in the Overseer tongue (which they'd hardly imagine a Terran could understand), "Is this the same man?"

"I think so," Broa said, "but I cannot be sure. One sees so many Terries in a planet-cycle. Is not the arm print correct?"

"Correct, yes. I am meditating whether some Terry might learn how to fake it."

Broa said, "Esteemed Lekkess, why have you this misdoubt of this unimportant Terry?"

"A mere feeling," Lekkess said. "It was endeavored to kill him, but he was clumsy enough to survive. It is my thought that Ralph Parr might wish to vanish leaving a dupe, slain, in his stead. He knew, perhaps, he was under scrutiny."

Broa made a slight gesture implying deference and a compliment to his superior's acumen. "I shall match your watchfulness."

Lekkess put the paper in a drawer and said, "And now, Ralph Parr. Will you tell us how the plot against you failed?"

"I happened to be flying with my shoes off," Steve lied, "and I felt the cockpit floor warming up. Then I heard a slight noise. I didn't wait to wonder about it; I just grabbed my shoes and bailed out."

"And how far were you when the explosion came?"

"Quite a ways. The chute had already opened."

"You were very lucky. Mr. Parr, we wish to punish whoever did this. Can you describe the men who led you to the corpse?"

Steve tried to look embarrassed. "I'd be, uh, violating professional ethics if I did. I have to maintain a list of informers, you know."

"Of course," Lekkess agreed smoothly. "But they may be the ones who tried to kill you. That is not certain, though, and in any case by helping you they were helping us. That is in their favor. Would you not possibly be helping them by identifying them?"

Steve avoided the alien's eyes. "I guess so, if you put it that way. But I don't know their names, and I'd never seen them before. Lots of my contacts are indirect."

"Well, then; you cannot identify them until we catch them. What are your plans for the future?"

Steve said, "I'm not going to be scared out of a good trade. I've got enough money to buy a new plane, if you'll approve it."

Lekkess spread his hands indulgently. "I think that will be a mere formality in your case. But it may take two or three days. Will you let us put you up at a hotel in town meanwhile?"

The hotel, of course, would be full of spies and spy devices, which didn't bother Steve. All the more chance to act innocent. He accepted; spent the time seeing the town and watching the Null Center as well as he could. The null tanks inside the buildings weren't much used — a few shiploads of Overseers going and coming, and a smaller flow of slaves. The rest of the traffic went the slow way, without benefit of tanks.

He got his new plane, accepted a couple of assignments from Captain Broa, and went back to Lovelock.

"First off," Steve told Rutledge, "they're suspicious of me. So we'd better plan now, in case they pick me up. How much ammunition do you have stored away? For airguns, I mean."

Rutledge leaned back in his chair. "Plenty of the anesthetic needles. Not many explosive bullets."

"You'll need a lot of bullets. They're a lot more effective against troops with cover. The noise helps, too."

"I suppose so," Rutledge said moodily. "Well, we've got men in more than one ammunition factory. I guess we can steal some."

"Do that. How about heavier weapons?"

"Just one antique gun — a howitzer, it was called. Not much ammunition for it."

Steve frowned, pondering. "If it turns out you have to attack the Null

Center, you'll need something to knock out at least a few of the towers. Can you get a good supply of that blasting jelly?"

"I guess so. A ton, maybe."

"That'll be plenty. Let's see. You'll have to set up positions on roofs — no, in top floors — of buildings near that outer fence. Can you arrange that?"

Rutledge scowled. "I suppose so, one way or another. Four warehouses that I can think of."

"Fine," Steve said. "One more thing, and I think you'll have it. A few — five dozen, maybe — of those small grav drives, like I've got in my plane."

"Good God!" Rutledge said, letting the front legs of his chair hit the floor. "Five dozen! We'd have to pilfer from every plane within a thousand miles!"

"How about the factory? Could you get them the same way you get the bullets?" Then, as the partisan looked at him oddly, "All right; you don't have to reveal your whole organization. But you need the units. Here's why: you take some lengths of three-inch pipe, maybe twenty feet long, smooth them inside, set them up solidly, and bore-sight them at the towers. Then you make projectiles like this: take a can and stick a contact detonator at one end. Half fill the can with blasting jelly. Put the drive unit in and seal the can, with wires leading out to start the unit. It'll make a good accurate weapon. And that's exactly what you need."

Rutledge sat pondering for a while. "All right; say we can accomplish all that. Are we supposed to blast a way in for you?"

"No. This is just a last resort, in case I fail. I'll find some other way of getting in." Steve hitched his chair closer to the desk. "I'll draw you some sketches of the grounds, but before I do, let's talk about my main plan. The invasion of this part of space will hit not long after midnight, your local time, on the data I gave you. Earlier — about dark — I want scads of convalescents pouring in from the rehabilitation camps. There's got to be a jam, and some confusion. I want you to make it look like a general uprising, over a big area. The first thing they'll do is pull in the most valuable personnel — Overseers especially — and begin sending them off-planet. That'll tie up the tanks for a while, and also give me a chance to slip into some bunch and pretend I'm a convalescent, or something. I'll take it from there."

Rutledge stared at him. "You're gambling Earth on an idea like *that?* Why, we've never even dreamed of trying to slip a spy in! No normal man could — why, you have to be a nut to be a slob! Those Booths they pass through, and all!"

Steve sighed. Rutledge was going to have to work miracles, under terrific pressure, and he deserved what assurance he could get. "Yes, as you say, you have to be a nut." He couldn't help grinning. "Well, I *am* a nut; a schizophrenic. A dual personality. You only know the dominant one. The other, which I can bring up when I have to, is a loyal Gree slave. A slob."

VI

Rutledge's preparations went slowly, and the days were getting few.

The man got moodier and moodier. Most of his contacts had to be made indirectly, and in some cases there wasn't even an indirect answer, so he couldn't be sure whether things were set. Few men would have stuck with it. Rutledge did, and Steve's respect grew.

Things converged fast in the final few days, and neither Steve nor Rutledge got much sleep. Steve had his own worries, which he kept to himself. For instance, what if his own side, presuming him dead or a prisoner, moved the date up? And even if they didn't, how was he going to get inside the restangle, let alone the square?

He was almost ready to go along with one of Rutledge's camp-harrassing groups and try to sneak into a camp as an inmate, when a summons came from Captain Broa.

He dared delay only for a short talk with Rutledge. "It's possible they'll hold me. If I get inside, I'll try to signal. Do some of your men know Morse code? I'll get hold of a flashlight and signal the evening of the attack, if I can. It'll just be one word. 'Yes' will mean I've gotten the information I need and sent it. 'No' will mean I've failed, and you'll have to make an all-out attack on the Center. If you don't get inside all five Null buildings, don't waste time trying. Once they're locked up, nothing short of nuclear bombs will crack them. Go for the powerhouses. You'll have to get all three, because they'll be interconnected. All right?"

"I guess so. What if there's no signal?"

"Take that as a 'No'." He scanned the tall man's face. "Not optimistic, are you? Look, I've been through things like this before. Our chances aren't so bad."

He wished he could believe that himself.

Broa was alone in the office except for two guards. He greeted Steve, then said into his desk intercom, "Send in that prisoner in the Ralph Parr case."

The man they brought in was sullen. Broa asked, "Mr. Parr, have you ever seen this man before?"

Steve looked closely. "No, sir. Not that I remember."

"You're sure he's not one of the two who led you to the woman's corpse?"

"I'm sure."

"Mm." The Overseer sat watching Steve for a minute. "Well, we are pretty sure he is involved. We wanted you to see him before, ah, he had been interrogated too rigorously. We will want you to look at his confederates when they are caught."

"All right," Steve said. "Will you want me to come back?"

Broa said smoothly, "It will probably not be very long. I thought rather than put you to extra travel, we would lodge you here. For your own protection, I would rather not send you to a Terran hotel. I have arranged for you to stay at the Conscript barracks. It will not be as luxurious as I would like, but you will

be comfortable and well protected."

Steve tried not to show his consternation. He was not, of course, being offered a choice. Conscript barracks was the compound he'd seen at the northern side of the square. It was inside the rectangle, but he'd be under close guard.

The compound, sharing one fence with the square, was divided into three parts. The ground car Broa provided chugged along just outside the rectangle, turned a corner and was passed into the middle part of the compound.

This part held a small barracks for permanent guards, a motor pool shed, a building marked 'Command' and a T-shaped Med building into which a short line of young Terran men was filing. One tip of the T touched a fence which cut off the west third of the compound — where the long buildings probably housing infants were. He saw now that there were two smaller buildings, one of which seemed to be a nurses' dormitory, the other apparently being for female conscripts. A few girls watched his ground car listlessly.

The other tip of the T touched a board fence (which was undoubtedly to keep male conscripts away from the nurses and Terran girls). From beyond that fence, in the eastern third of the compound, came the voices of many men. There were evidently games of some kind going on, plus a lot of fairly animated bull sessions. Above the general noise rose the voice of someone — a non-Terran human slave, Steve thought — calling drill orders.

The ground car stopped before the Command building. An Overseer came out, looked closely at Steve. "Mr. Parr?"

"Yes."

The alien called over a guard. "Mr. Parr is to be a guest for a few days. Take him to Barracks Six and introduce him to Master-at-arms Weatherford. He need not stop in med."

They pushed past the young men, into the med building. Inside, Techs were examining the conscripts, giving them pills, and holding hypo-squirts against their arms. Steve and his guide went on, turned left and walked along a corridor between closed doors and offices. At the end, a guard let them through a door and they were beyond the board fence.

There were a dozen long three-storied barracks, in two rows, fairly closely spaced. Between, men were pitching coins, arguing, watching or just sitting in the sun. Guards, armed with needler-pistols and wearing wrist communicators, patrolled in pairs. Beyond the cluster of barracks, at the east end of the compound, he saw the squad being drilled, and acting like small boys under punishment. Other men watched and jeered good-naturedly. There were at least two volleyball games going on, and, by the sounds, a softball game out of his sight.

His guide said, "This is Barracks Six." It was set a little apart from the others and, unlike them, had barred windows.

Weatherford was Terran, shorter than Steve, plump, with nervous eyes behind thick glasses. He

was cordial enough. "Bunk; sure, sure. No baggage? I'll give you two sets of gray fatigues and a standard ditty-bag, all right? Shorts, and socks, and all that. Let's see. Don't want you on the ground floor. This's the criminal barracks, you know; watch 'em closer than the others. Put you on the third floor, alone. I'll give you a set of keys. You can use the fire escape. Mess's on the first floor. I suppose you could sit with me and the guards, if —"

Steve said, "If it's all the same, it might be better if I ate with the inmates. They might get ideas about me otherwise."

"Sure, sure; if you don't mind. Pretty rough, some of them."

"I won't be here long," Steve said. "So you run the criminal barracks, eh? Must be a job."

Weatherford swelled visibly. "It sure is! Sometimes —" He hesitated, unsure of Steve's status.

Steve put him at ease. "I was a little surprised that they put me up here. Usually they lodge me at a hotel in town." He grinned confidentially. "I didn't agree with them a hundred per cent on a little deal we have, and I think they were worried I might skip. Not me! I know where my bread's buttered." He yawned. "Quite an operation here. Was that Commander Lekkess let me in here? I heard someone mention the name."

"No, no. Lekkess is in Special Contacts, over Broa. This Captain Teeg. Has the day duty, every other week. Nice fella, for a — nice fella."

"He seemed that," Steve said. "Well, I don't want to keep you from your work."

The fences, other than the board fence on the west, were wire, and there was no restriction against watching activity in the square.

After lunch, about three hundred men were marched through a gate into the square, where transport ships waited. They went joking and shouting back boasts, each carrying his single canvas bag on his shoulder. The slave guards wore sour expressions at such unmilitary behavior, and were no doubt thinking that things would change once these jaunty Terries were gotten off-planet. Two transports took the whole draft. They didn't leave via the tanks, but rose to null out of the stratosphere. It was minutes before the implosion booms came faintly down.

Later in the afternoon, a column of twenty girls walked out to a small ship. They obviously didn't know what to expect, but weren't cheerful.

It wasn't until evening that any babies left, and then Steve didn't actually see them. A ship drifted over to land near a gate, and a slanting conveyor was run out to it. Presumably the infants, drugged, each in its bassinet or cocoon, slid down on rollers. There must have been quite a number, for the transfer took a long time.

The word evidently got around among the inmates that Steve was bunked alone on the third floor. At the evening meal he ate casually, saying nothing until their curiosity outweighed their suspicion. The man next to him — a slight, nervous man in early middle age, said, "Would you pass the salt?"

Steve did so, pretending not to notice another shaker within easy reach of the man. He gave him a half grin. The man took the invitation. "Just came in this afternoon, didn't you? I heard you're all alone on the top floor."

Steve grimaced. "Yeah. Guess they don't want to take a chance on my getting shipped off-planet by mistake."

Now the whole table was listening. They were a nondescript bunch, only a few of them hard-looking. The slight man said, "You ain't a conscript, then?"

Steve shook his head. "I had some business with them, and I must have said the wrong thing. Anyway, they want to hang onto me for a few days while they check. How about you?"

The man grinned abashedly. "I was doing a little on the Black Market, and they caught me. I only expected a fine, but here I am. Been here eight days now, waiting for a shipment to build up, I guess. You hear all sorts of things." He looked hopefully at Steve.

Steve could have told him that the very best he could expect was a labor battalion on some unhealthy world, and that at worst he'd be used as a live target. Instead, he said, "I've never heard much from them."

The man nodded. "Guess they'd just as soon have us worry." He offered a hand. "My name's Slater."

Steve shook hands. "Ralph Parr."

A deeper voice from across the table said, "Did you say Ralph Parr?"

Steve looked up. The speaker was a heavy-shouldered man with a weatherbeaten (and fistbeaten) face, curly hair with a salting of gray, a short-cropped beard to match, dark eyes, and big hairy hands. Steve said, "That's right." If you chose a masquerade, you had to stick to it.

The man smiled faintly. "You're a bounty hunter."

Steve met his eyes. "Anything wrong with that?"

There were mutters around the table. The heavy man smiled harder. "Matter of opinion. I'm no Sunday School teacher myself. I've heard you never ratted on a bargain."

Steve said, "Maybe I should have, sometimes. It looks like my tail's in a crotch right now."

The man shrugged, as if to imply that that was no distinction. "Anyway, being what you are explains why they're bunking you alone. They don't want you to wake up with your head bashed in. Now, I wonder. Is it your head they're concerned about? Or just the bedding?"

VII

Next morning, Steve wandered about watching the card games and coin-pitching.

He spent a few minutes figuring out how the game of horseshoes (new to him) was scored, and finally took a drop-out's place in one of the volleyball games. He noticed that the other inmates of his own barracks were mustered and counted, every half hour.

After a while he wandered over to the sunny side of the compound and sat down with his back against a barracks wall, watching the activ-

ity in the square. There was a tower a few yards to his left, its ladder drawn up out of reach. He didn't glance up at the guards.

A big ship arrived via tank, rolled out onto the rails, then lifted to move to the east fence. A dozen or so Overseers disembarked into waiting ground cars. Back from leave, probably. Across the square, beyond the transient slave barracks (mostly empty) he could see the top of the Special Contacts building. Tentatively, he hoped to get back there when the right moment came.

Someone came around the end of the building. He glanced up and saw the bearded man who'd sat across the table. He didn't tense visibly, but eased the weight off his right hand so it would be free.

The other sat down within two feet of him after a nod, and stared for a while at the square. Finally he said, "My name's Langdon."

Steve grunted asknowledgement. There was the chance that this man might be a spy.

Langdon said, "There's no listening bugs here. We can talk."

Steve glanced at him. "Is there something we ought to talk about?"

The bearded man grinned. "We ought to talk about Ralph Parr. I knew him very well."

Steve, aware that tower guards would be watching, if no one else, kept his face straight. "You must be crazy. I never saw you before."

"Come off it," Langdon said. "If I were a stool, I'd play along and try to let you trap yourself."

That had already occurred to Steve. He said carefully, "If you don't believe I'm Ralph Parr, who in hell do you think I am?"

Langdon made a little gesture with one hand. "Why don't *you* tell *me?*"

Steve shifted to a more comfortable position. "Why do you come to me with a story like that? What is it you want?"

"That's simple," Langdon said. "I want out. I'm not going to get hysterical about it, but I think I have things figured, and I'm scared. The Slobs are crazy-fanatic; they die for this Gree with a look of glory on their faces. Now if Gree were benevolent, and this being a Slob were so wonderful, he'd extend it to all of us, wouldn't he? I just don't swallow the thing. Why, do you know what the word 'slave' used to mean? It still does, if you shovel off all the manure. And we're not even slaves! We're cattle; no more. It doesn't take brains to see that the babies are being taken somewhere to be made into Slobs. And if the pick of the crop are taken for that, where does that leave the rest of us? And I don't even rate with the conscripts!"

Steve wished he could get up and walk away. This man was Trouble, triple distilled, whether he was sincere or not. "Suppose you're right. What does that have to do with me? Do you have some idea I can speak for you, or something?"

Langdon grinned again. "I'll grab at anything. You've got some kind of connections, or you wouldn't have gotten away with what you have. I've got money stashed away; a lot

of it. Three-fourths of it's yours, if you can get me a running chance."

It was Steve's turn to grin. "Why three-fourths? Why not all of it?"

"Because," the bearded man said, "I'd need a certain amount to buy my way around. And I wouldn't be holding out on you." He gathered himself as if to arise. "You think I'm a fake? Do you want me to walk over under that tower, shake my fist at the guards, and yell, 'The hell with Gree!'? Just say so. I may get crisped, but I'll take the chance. Shall I do it?"

"No," Steve told him coolly, "that would fix things for sure." He thought hard. He didn't want to let the man know that the Occupation really thought he was Ralph Parr — that would give Langdon a leverage. "All right; listen. I don't know exactly what can be bought and what can't, but I know it would have to be done very quietly. I may need a day or two."

Langdon, face inscrutable, watched him for a moment. Then he said, "The barracks'll be full in a day or two." He got up and walked away.

Steve knew, which Langdon probably didn't, that bribing an Overseer called for more than planetary coin. Gree treated the Overseer race well, to keep their loyalty.

Steve couldn't simply elude the man, for in his desperation Langdon would talk, loudly. Suppose Steve enlisted him somehow. Could he do it without telling too much? Even if he could, how could he get the man out of the next shipment of criminals?

What it came down to was smuggling Langdon along with him. He'd vaguely planned to get a slave uniform somehow for himself, but even if he got another for Langdon, the man would hardly know how to act. The masquerade wouldn't last an hour.

Was there some way he could get Langdon into one of the non-criminal shipments? He doubted the man would accept even that. How about hiding him in a ground vehicle — one of the big buses, for instance, that brought in local conscripts? Not likely. Was there any other place Langdon could hide, until the planet was either taken or not? (If not, neither he nor Langdon would be worrying).

There was a storage compartment on the third floor, filled with mattresses. Could Langdon hide there? The trouble with all such notions was the barracks records. Well, then, Langdon's absence as well as Steve's would have to look legitimate.

He thought about that for a while. He'd been assuming that, other things working out, Weatherford could be fooled somehow, which would help temporarily. Suppose the Master-at-arms were convinced that Steve had been summoned back to Special Contacts. How could that include Langdon?

Steve's mind kept circling, bumping into the same obstacles, bouncing back to the starting point. Get a uniform. Pose as a guard. Fake orders; take Langdon somewhere.

Could Langdon conceivably pose as the guard instead, taking Steve out? The idea made Steve's hopes

leap at first. But the more he thought of it, the surer he was the man couldn't handle it. The right background was absolutely required to act like a Gree slave.

Then, suddenly, it struck him, and this time his pulse quickened so he had to get up and walk around. It was wild! Wild, yes; and full of hair-trigger risks; but actually, the logical thing! And he'd only need one uniform. He — Steve — would pose as the slave guard. And Langdon would pose as Steve!

All they had to do was dodge Weatherford and anyone else who'd recognize them. He went looking for Langdon.

VIII

Two days later, near the end of the afternoon exercise period, he watched cautiously from a window on the ground floor of Barracks Six while Langdon sauntered toward a group of men not far away, who were watching the coin-tossing. Langdon stayed unobtrusively to the rear.

A pair of guards strolled down the space onto which the barracks all opened. Steve scowled. Both mere Techs, one Second, one Third. Well . . .

He signaled Langdon. The bearded man tapped another man on the shoulder, spoke to him in a conspiratorial way. Steve and he'd worked the message out: "Something's happened to Weatherford! He's lying flat on the floor —" Langdon broke off, pretending to discover the guards a few feet away.

One of them jerked his head around. They both ran, spun Langdon about. Steve grinned at the pantomime of innocence. Langdon was an actor, if nothing else. They hustled him away from the other men. One of the guards spoke into his wrist communicator.

Another guard came trotting; probably a section leader. Steve's pulse leaped as he saw the Gunner Third insignia. More guards came running. They herded the men back, while the Gunner Third and one other shoved Langdon toward Barracks Six. Steve wiped perspiration from his hands, took quick strides and pressed himself behind the open door.

Feet clumped on the wooden porch and Langdon came in, followed by the two guards. Langdon whirled suddenly and threw himself at their knees. Both floundered, trying to keep their balance. Steve took one step and hit the Tech Second with a rabbit punch. Langdon cushioned his fall. Meanwhile Steve had gotten his left hand over the Gunner's mouth. The man was strong; they struggled briefly until Langdon got to his feet and helped. Unwillingly, Steve killed again with the same blow. Without letting the body fall, he hoisted it to his shoulder. He gave a quick glance around to make sure nothing had fallen to the floor. "Fast! The inside stairs!"

They got the two bodies to the second floor, found it empty, invested seconds gulping air, then carried their burdens up to the third floor. Steve unlocked the door and they dragged the bodies in.

The first thing Steve did was strip

off the Gunner's wrist communicator and peer at the name engraved on it. He thumbed the instrument to a certain wavelength and said in as bored a voice as he could manage, "This is Rayko, Gunner Third. False Alarm; Weatherford's all right. Let everybody go."

Hastily they stripped the Gunner and Steve got into the uniform. Then they dragged the bodies to the mattress storage room and hid them well. Steve peered out a window. No excitement in the yard, though he heard casual footsteps on the first floor. He showed Langdon how to work one of the needler pistols, then said, "Now I've got some ticklish talking to do. Meanwhile you'll find my razor in the latrine." He grinned. This was the first Langdon knew about this facet of the plan.

Langdon raised his head, scowling. "What are you talking about?"

"You'll have to shave off the beard. You're going to pose as me. Ralph Parr, that is."

For an instant the outlaw looked startled. Then his face twisted and he suppressed a guffaw. "Cute!" Then he frowned, felt his beard, muttered a word and walked toward the latrine.

Now Steve had to run a simple gamble: he didn't know how high Gunner Rayko rated in the guard here, or whether he had the privilege of calling the Command building direct. There was no way to find out but to try.

He raised the communicator to his mouth. "Gunner Third Rayko, calling Com building." He waited through an eternity. Then, "Com building, switchboard. Go ahead, Gunner Rayko."

"This is Gunner Rayko. I have something peculiar here. Can I talk to Captain Teeg?"

There was a pause. "I'll record, Gunner, and ask. Go ahead."

"Well — someone started a rumor about one of the barracks master-at-arms being killed. It was false, but I think I have the Terry who started it. I want to send him for questioning."

Another wait, then the switchboard came back on. "Gunner Rayko, send the man to the captain's office."

Steve paused and tried to relax. Then he went and found Langdown scowling into a mirror at bare, unnaturally pale jowls. "For God's sake, dirty up your face some way!" He glanced at his watch. He'd timed it pretty close; the men were due back in the barracks within minutes. "Let's go. Pull your cap down as much as you can."

He went ahead of Langdon, fearing he'd find Weatherford on the ground floor. But the MA had evidently looked in and left again. He instructed Langdon as they marched toward the gate. The guards listened to his story, nodded and let them through.

Captain Teeg, in his office with two stand-by guards, watched them silently for a minute, his face (to one who could read it) showing mild disgust. "Well, Gunner, what is this story of a false rumor?"

Steve breathed his relief. He hadn't expected an Overseer to remember his face after one short look, but it had been possible. "I don't know much about it, sir. Gunner Rayko just told me this was the man who started it."

Teeg snarled an oath in the Overseer tongue and turned to his desk communicator.

The two guards, unsuspicious and relaxed, turned their heads to watch the Captain. Each of them jerked and grunted in surprise as Steve's perfectly-aimed needles hit their throats. At the same instant, Langdon launched himself at the Overseer. The humanoid half-turned in his chair, raising an arm in defense, and Langdon hit him, carrying him over backwards. Steve heard one muffled cry as the pair dropped to the floor.

Steve had his own problems. He reached the two guards, who, newly astonished at his attack, were just an instant slow in reacting. He got a hand over the mouth of each, bearing them off-balance against the wall. One swung a fist and hit Steve high on the head, stunningly. Steve had wits enough left to probe with fingers for that one's eyes, making him use his hands to defend himself. Meanwhile Steve brought up a knee at the other one, who was clawing at the hand over his mouth.

And then it was over. The quick-acting anesthetic took effect, and the pair started to go limp, clutching at their own throats where the paralysis began. They slumped to the floor, breathing raggedly.

Steve shook his head to clear it as Langdon got to his feet. The Overseer lay unconscious on the floor. It appeared that Langdon had scored a perfect throat shot too. The outlaw grinned. "A pistol is a pistol."

Steve crouched for a few moments, listening. The chair going over, and the thrashing bodies, didn't seem to have attracted anyone. He stepped around the desk, raised the Overseer's left wrist and felt for a pulse.

There was one. Good. Otherwise the wrist communicator would have flashed an alarm. Neither did one remove an Overseer's communicator from his arm. Steve lifted the limp hand up, took a few deep breaths, thumbed the instrument, and said, "Captain Teeg calling Special Contacts."

The moments dragged. Finally, "Special Contacts, switchboard. Go ahead, Captain Teeg."

"Special Contacts, I wish to speak to the Overseer on duty."

"That wil be Captain Broa, sir." There was a click of connections, then a voice said in the Overseer tongue, "Esteemed Teeg? Broa speaks."

Steve sighed with relief. If Broa had answered less formally, indicating a close personal friendship, he'd have been in trouble. He held his mouth a little away from the communicator and said, in Overseer, "Esteemed Broa, health. Recall you the Terry jackal Ralph Parr, whom I am offering bed?"

"Health. I recall."

"Such Terry has unburrowed scheme of disquieting shape, claims

he. Impertinence, via refusing to divulge details."

"Impertinence minutely forgivable, though angering. Parr was admonished not to talk to others than I. Your wish?"

Steve said, "My wish, send Terry to esteemed Broa."

"Your wish, mine. I await."

Steve made the polite close. Then he thumbed the instrument again. "Captain Teeg calling motor pool." He ordered a ground car and driver for one Gunner Third with a Terry prisoner. Then he set the communicator, and also the desk intercom, on 'Do Not Disturb'.

Langdon dragged the bodies behind the desk while Steve searched hastily through drawers. He found the small coder-and-reader he wanted. "Here, hold up your arm and I'll make you Ralph Parr." After that he unzipped his own uniform and added a slave identity to his abdomen. Then he wiped the old identity from his own arm. He replaced the instrument in the desk, searched some more until he found a compact flashlight, and said, "Let's go."

IX

With a Tech Second driving, the car retraced the route to Special Contacts.

Dusk was advancing, and as they neared a tower a searchlight picked them up and followed them. At the next tower another light took over. Finally they turned the last corner, approached Special Contacts, and were cleared through the outer fence.

They sat in the same waiting room, again with four guards idling on stand-by. There was only one other Terran waiting, and Steve hoped Broa wouldn't call them too soon. Broa was sure to remember his face. If the wait lasted long enough, Rutledge's diversionary attacks on outlying camps would be under way, and Steve could play it by ear.

He glanced at Langdon. The man seemed cool, even faintly amused, and he wasn't asking any questions. Was that a bad sign? Was he a spy after all, and had Rutledge already been betrayed?

Hardly. If so, evacuation would already have begun. But Steve's nerves were in bad shape. A window showed complete darkness outside. Things ought to be happening by now.

A frightened-looking Terran came from the inner office, and a guard took the single waiting man in. Steve got up and paced; went to the water cooler for a drink.

Then, abruptly, the office door burst open. Guards almost shoved the startled Terran out, hustled him to a chair. Broa's head poked out. Barely glancing at Steve or Langdon, he spat out to the guards, "Keep these two Terrans here until further orders!" He slammed the office door and ran for the elevator.

Steve jumped to his feet, giving Langdon a glance. Spy or not, the man was on his own now. He said to the guards — six of them now, including two from inside — "Something's wrong! Four of you'd better come with me!"

They didn't protest. Steve took the stairs at a run, found several guards

standing around aimlessly on the second floor, snapped, "Ground floor! Guard the doors!" and ran down the flight of stairs. No one objected to his leaving the building.

Ships were landing near the transient barracks, disgorging convalescents. He ran that way, joining a group being marched toward the square, as if he were assigned to escort them.

There was evidently an alarm, but no space alert since no one was taking shelter. Ground cars and foot traffic were getting jammed. Loudspeakers blared suddenly, "Battle Stations! Battle Stations! All ground defense personnel, on the double!" He shot a look to the east of the square. No trouble there; this was evidently a routine precaution. A company of Gunners with heavy laser rifles trotted past, lined up at the nearest Inquisition Booth and began to filter through into the square. One of the stand-by ships on the rails was loading Overseers' families from the bungalow area. Not good; the group he'd joined wouldn't have a high priority, and meanwhile they'd stay outside the square.

A ship lifted from outside the square, rose and vanished to the south. Troops going to relieve a camp, no doubt. More transports were landing, with more refugees. So far Rutledge was doing fine. Steve moved close to another Gunner. "What's up?"

The warrior nodded toward one of the convalescents in line. "The Tech here says a couple hundred Terries hit their camp just after dark and overran the defenses. Must be a general revolt. I've seen four shiploads of troops take off in different directions, and I hear the Patrol's hitting every bunch of Terries it sees in the open."

The huge doors of one null building began to grind open. A ship rolled in, the doors closed, and another ship was already taking its place on the rails. More Overseers and families were arriving, by ground car or by small ship. The Gunner beside Steve whistled. "The Terries must be really raising hell!"

Two armed Overseers, accompanied by four B'lant with laser rifles, hurried up and addressed Steve and the other Gunner. "These four will take over here. You go on through the Booth and be ready inside!"

The other Gunner turned on his heel, and Steve had no choice but to follow. The door of the Booth opened and the warrior stepped in. The door closed. Steve waited, fighting his dread. He'd fooled Booths before, but only with heavy psycho-conditioning and drugs. Now he had nothing — except the old resource he didn't want to use.

The slave warrior emerged on the other side, face twisted with emotion, and turned to wait for Steve. The door opened. He forced himself to step in and the door closed, leaving him in near-darkness.

He concentrated with all his strength on the words, "I am Jen! I am Jen!"

"*What is Gree?*"

Jen gulped a deep breath; another. A hoarse sound came from

his throat. His mind was muggy; he felt as if he'd been groping through some thick black half-poisonous gas. And there were all those weird dreams spinning in his brain . . .

"What is Gree?" The deep fatherly voice of the Booth was a little sharper this time.

"Gree is All! Gree is —" Jen half-sobbed out the litany, struggling with his aching throat. It was as if he'd been lost for a long time; away from love and protection of Gree. "Gree is —"

The Booth's tentacle-like probes were feeling over him. "You are physically well. What is wrong with you?"

"I —" Sobs interrupted him. "I am — unreliable!"

Instantly a tentacle jabbed a drug into his throat. "Name and number?"

"Jen. 377 03 50."

There was a pause. "Not station personnel. A convalescent, then. Who ordered you into this Booth?"

"I — do not know." The confusion was getting worse. "I am not well! Someone is trying to . . ."

"A Med Center, at once!" The door he was facing opened, and the Booth said to someone outside, "Take this man to Med. Jen, give the Gunner your needler."

Jen handed over the weapon. The gunner looked at him very oddly, then pointed to a building. "There." Jen walked ahead of him.

For some reason, he felt a vast relief. He looked around him. He was not under a dome, and the planet's air was comfortable. The star constellations were unfamiliar.

A med Tech listened to Jen's escort, then pushed a stud on a desk. Another door opened and an Overseer said, "Bring him in here."

They had him lie down after removing his shoes and cap and one-piece uniform, and a Tech pressed a hypo-squirt against his bare shoulder. He hardly felt it. The Overseer waited a minute, then said, "Now, then. We won't be able to trace you for a while. Can't you remember anything?"

The injection was relaxing him. "Oh, yes, sir. I can give you my Hive world, and my creche before that, and a list of stations and ships and battles. The dates are all clear in my mind."

"Do you remember coming to Earth?"

"Earth? Is that the name of this planet? No, sir."

"How did you get the Gunner's uniform?"

Jen lifted his head, with difficulty. "I *am* a Gunner Third, sir!"

"Of course," the Overseer said soothingly, "but convalescents wear plain white fatigues."

Jen let his head fall. "I don't remember being a convalescent, sir. Not here, and not recently."

The Overseer pondered. "One load of troops came in and disembarked this afternoon. Maybe you were with them. Do you remember a bump on the head or anything?"

"No. I —" Jen struggled to a sitting position. "Sir, it's worse than that! I should have confessed a long time ago. I've had blank spots that I couldn't remember, many times,

and I've . . . I've had dreams and feelings of guilt, and . . ." He looked at a calendar on the wall. It showed a planetary date that meant nothing to him, and also the standard galactic date. He nearly came to his feet. "Gree! I've lost a twentieth of a lifetime this time!" He pushed himself the rest of the way up, stood at shaky attention. "Sir, I confess that I am unreliable. I've dreamt I was even . . . unloyal!"

The Overseer was watching him intently now. "Unloyal? You're sure of that?"

"No, sir. I — I'm not much sure of anything. It's as if I dreamed . . ."

The Overseer stared at him a minute longer, then seemed to relax a little. "Well, we're going to have to trace you back, but we can't do it now. Suppose we let you sleep for a while, under sedation and under guard. Do you think that'll ease your mind?"

However, as he drifted near sleep, in a locked room, he did not feel at ease. A voice inside his skull seemed to be shouting at him, telling him not to sleep. It raged at him to get on his feet, exercise, anything to stay awake. And it seemed incomprehensibly to bellow at him, "Get out of the way!"

X

Time had passed. Thunder rolled somewhere. Steve squirmed and moaned, in a lassitude like thick black molasses.

A battle was going on outside. Small arms, the rasp of lasers, a few bomb blasts. Not nuclear. It must be Rutledge's despairing attack on the Center. Steve pressed both hands to his face, tried to remember. Had he sent a signal?

Then it all came back to him. Jen's confession; everything. God! If anyone did just a little thinking . . . Desperation brought him to his feet, darting glances around the room. The Gunner's uniform lay folded on a chair, but there were no weapons. He squirmed into the garment, felt about for his shoes, got into them and stood panting. Now that the will existed, his strong body fought the drugs. He went to the door and tapped on it, then pounded harder.

There was no response. Somewhere in the building, he heard running footsteps. He stood back, gathered himself, threw his weight against the door. It burst open into an empty corridor. He stood for a moment, trying to recall the layout of this building. He turned to his

right, ran along a corridor, met another, turned into it and saw at its end a knot of med Techs and wheeled beds. New casualties coming in. He ran that way, pushed by, and got outside. He paused at a corner of the building where he could see the null area.

Troops were thick in defensive positions around the null buildings and their powerhouses. The fence beyond that, and the farther fence of the outer rectangle, had gaping holes in them. All the towers he could see were blasted. But half a dozen Scout ships hovered, raking the nearest buildings with heavy beamers and explosive shells. It was remarkable that any counter-fire came from the buildings, but it did, enough of it to keep the ground troops pinned down. And one Scout ship lay crashed.

Rutledge had done some damage, but the attack was clearly beaten. What partisans survived were trapped, and would be rounded up when things got organized. If the planet lived that long . . .

Steve moved to where he could see the middle of the square. The evacuation was being hustled, and no more ships were settling onto the rails. And as soon as the space attack came — it couldn't be more than minutes now — Gree High Command would chop off the evacuation completely, and send the killer bombs.

Sick with failure and the imminence of death, and the drugs, Steve moved a little closer to see more of the area. There were still Overseers and their families arriving, and hundreds of slave convalescents waited in ragged ranks for their turn. A slave broke ranks and ran for a ship and was burned down instantly by a guard. The body curled up and lay still.

The data! No chance of getting into the Null buildings now. Where else? In the Operations building, no doubt; and in the Administrations offices, and in Communications.

But those were as well guarded as the tanks, For a minute he toyed with the idea of getting a weapon somewhere, charging the Overseers and getting as many as he could. God, how he hated them; and he'd never realized it until now! At least he could die fighting. But Rutledge, if he was still alive, was hanging on, still trying . . .

He made himself state the problem, sanely and basically. Get the data. Get a message drone to send it.

At least he wouldn't stand here!

One more Gunner skirting the edge of the square drew no attention. He found a corpse with a laser rifle near it, grabbed that and moved toward the Null buildings.

An Overseer shouted at him. He turned and saw the stocky Alien struggling with two valises. A stalled ground car, and an overturned one, were near by. Evidently the Overseer had been driving, and had had a collision.

Steve didn't want to get commandeered right now. He pretended not to understand, and ran on. The Overseer raged, and a laser-pistol flashed near Steve. He dove for

cover, but he heard the Overseers scream and turned his head in time to see the stocky body fall, badly crisped. He whirled, looking for the source of the heavy beamer that must have done it, but it was out of sight.

Langdon? Conceivably.

No time to ponder that. He ran on toward the two ground cars, threw himself into cover between them. No one seemed to be paying any attention to him. He peered out to the east. Rutledge's men were still shooting.

He looked at his watch. Thirty-five minutes past midnight. God! The Null buildings were so near, and so unreachable . . .

Then he swore and hit himself on the forehead. Of course! The data would be pre-programmed into the stand-by transports! All he had to do was get into one of them — if any were still here — and . . .

But what about a message drone?

He swore again. God, he was dense! Why a message drone? If he could capture the ship, he'd simply send *it!* Not that he could pinpoint his waiting squadron, but the ship would be big enough to spot from quite a distance. He grinned. A hell of a plan. But the square was in confusion, and where there was confusion there might be a way.

A quick scrutiny convinced him two of the stand-by ships were still on the rails. One was loading Overseers and families. Now if could put on a good act . . .

He got to his feet slowly, acting dazed. He looked around; stared at the dead Overseer, then walked shakily to the ground car still on its wheels, hoping any watcher would assume he was the driver just regaining consciousness. Slowly, he climbed in and turned switches. The motor roared to life. He backed slowly to make a turn. A bent fender scraped on a tire, but the car ran. He drove near the corpse, stopped, got out and hoisted the two valises into the back seat, then drove slowly toward the loading ship.

Two B'lant guards stopped him. He said, acting dazed, "I was bringing the Commander, and —" he turned his eyes toward the burning corpse — "this luggage . . ."

One of the B'lant said, "He won't need it now."

Steve said, "No. But his family . . . I thought I'd just take it around to the cargo hatch."

The B'lant shrugged. Steve drove slowly around the end of the rails and to the other side of the ship.

The ship consisted of five squat cylinders joined face to face, the combined axis horizontal now. A combat ship would have duplicate control rooms in the second and fourth sections, but this one would have only the single control room in the middle. A main catwalk would run along the axis, and the control room would be reached via a ladder.

He waited in a short line of other slaves bearing luggage. There was an awful urge to look up at the stars. Had things broken already? He could almost feel the great fleets flashing through null, ready to space out in a vast globe around Earth.

He stepped onto the ramp, carry-

ing the two valises and the laser rifle. Slaves were stowing luggage in several compartments of the first cylinder. A guard looked at Steve questioningly as he started on past. Steve said, "Ship's Officer's," and kept going.

He had to wait maddening minutes for a chance at the control room. Finally the ladder was clear. He set the luggage near the hatch of a service elevator; took the ladder himself, carrying the rifle. He reached the top, stepped through a hatch and pressed a stud to close it.

At the sound, Overseers and slave Techs turned. First of all, Steve beamed four intercom grills into molten plastic and metal, then, stifling any squeamishness, he burned down the men and humanoids in order of their dangerousness. One B'lant didn't die easily, but his needle missed Steve by a foot and Steve killed him.

He leaped to a console, studying lights and symbols. Should he punch for the vital data? No; Operations would have a monitor tie-in. Already a speaker crackled and droned out, "E-eleven, I do not have voice contact from you. Check your circuits. E-eleven. Come in, E-eleven!" Steve ignored it. He punched buttons, feeding in data. They'd record it at Operations, of course, but with luck no one would see any significance immediately. Hating to spend the time, but not daring otherwise, he punched for a playback to make sure he'd given it right. He had. He punched hasty orders, then reached for a stud marked, "Execute." When he punched that, he'd be on his way to the squadron. His hand hung in the air. Was it right to leave Rutledge holding the bag?

Of course! Planets were at stake, and he couldn't help Rutledge anyway. Still . . .

Cursing his own illogic he added a short delay-time to the orders, then punched the "Execute" button.

He leaped for the hatch, got outside, closed it again, and turned the rifle at the seal, welding it shut. He fairly slid down the ladder.

He had to walk, not run, along the catwalk and out the cargo hatch, his skin prickling. He got outside, trotted down the ramp and climbed into the ground-car. He drove as fast and as slow as he dared, toward the nearest building, which happened to be a mess hall. As he turned a corner he noticed that convalescents were piling into ships not near the null buildings. That meant they were scattering into space haphazzardly, which in turn meant a space alert. Sweat burst from his skin. God knew how soon the bombs would come!

He heard the ship's loudspeakers blare, "Clear all hatches! Null in ten seconds." Then the sound of hatches slamming shut, and shouts of surprise and fear. He jumped from the ground car, letting it move on, and threw himself into the angle of building and ground, face down, hands clamped over his ears, mouth open.

Gentle fingers seemed to pluck at him. Then the awful thunder of a close-by null implosion battered him like hammers.

He waited until the echoes died away. Then, dazed, ears ringing, he got to his feet and looked for a way into the building. Windows were shattered and board siding had pulled loose, but the walls hadn't collapsed. Not that the building would prolong his life even by a second, if the killer bombs came, but he simply didn't have the bravado to wait in the open.

It ocurred to him he might do something for Rutledge after all. He patted his pockets, found he still had the small flashlight and started up to the second floor.

After sending the word, 'Yes' several times in various directions, he just found a place to stay out of sight, and waited. And when a new battle began less than twenty minutes later — a real one, this time — he stayed where he was. The thousand Effogen ships in Earth's skies hardly needed any more help from him.

XI

The Birds of Effogus didn't show themselves to the public, but the high-ranking one who was Steve's immediate superior did let a couple of Earthmen see him. He'd been talking to Steve, who was resting in bed; and said in his dry elfin whisper, "I won't pester you any more just now, Colonel Duke, but there are two Terrans to see you." He left, chuckling for some reason.

Rutledge and Langdon walked in, eyes still wide. "Good God!" the lanky partisan said, "they actually *are* birds! If birds can have wings and arms both. But their heads and faces. . . . "

Steve grinned. "They were humanoid once, but they altered their own genes. They added wings and made themselves small enough to fly in a normal atmosphere. They had a sort of dionysian philosophy then." He looked at Langdon. "I guess it was you who picked off that Overseer. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Langdon said, "but I didn't stick around long."

Steve frowned, pondering. "Something funny somewhere. How'd you get hold of a beamer?"

The outlaw said, "I just adopted your tactics and got myself a uniform. I saw you get tripped up by the Booth. When the fighting started, I got inside the square and watched for you."

Steve continued to frown. Langdon seemed to have done impossibly well for a man who hadn't ever seen the Center before.

Rutledge said, "I had him get captured under the name Langdon to try to stir up something among the conscripts, or the outlaws, at least. When he was lucky enough to meet you, he took it from there."

"Oh," Steve said, "you had other irons in the fire besides me. Well, that's all right. He raised his head again, suddenly. "Say — what's his real name?"

They both looked at him, dead-faced. Finally Rutledge said, "Ralph Parr."

END

UMPTY

by BASIL WELLS

He was trying to recapture a dead past — and found an unbelievable living future!

Dale Hrli had spent two lonesome nights in the wooded broken country that rims the eastern border of Ohio, trying to recapture the heady sense of adventure he had once experienced here.

With two other boys, ten years before, he had slipped away from stodgy old Umptown 773 for a glorious month-long period of fishing, trapping, and hunting for edible roots in the Western Reserve Forest. They had built this hidden, half-log, half-dugout, cabin near a tiny spring, and had lived a full, savage's existence — until their parents finally tracked them down and took them home.

Hrli had had enough. His projected week of fishing and tramping the winding trails of the forest preserve must be cut short. Tomorrow he would take his Umpty diploma — specialist in micro repair of tool abrasion — his month's supply of travel permits, transient hostel tickets, and laundry tokens, and start the Midwest tour his high marks had won . . .

Somewhere there must be a job for a trained young Umpty . . .

Suddenly he was conscious of clumsily crashing feet in the underbrush of the valley below him. Long after midnight — it could only be the passage of a band of fugitive Exars. Scores of these unhappy escapees from Umptown or industrial center laws existed somehow in this wilderness.

"Far enough," a faint voice came up to him. "Turn her loose."

A woman's voice protested. Other voices jumbled together and someone laughed derisively. The first voice cut across, louder now and angry. The others quieted. Hrli heard restless feet stomp.

"She goes unharmed," it said. "Last thing we want is trouble with the authorities. A little thefting in the fields and towns they'll let go. No violence."

"What do you call *this*?" The woman's voice was low, sweet.

"Couldn't let you give the alarm," the voice said. "After midnight, alone on the streets, you was asking for trouble. Now you can tramp back the way we come."

"But," the woman protested, "I don't know the way."

"There are signs . . . Come along, boys . . . Better not tell anyone you spent the night with us Exars either. Gossip."

"Oh!" Hrli could sense the tearful fury, "you — you monsters!"

Hrli slipped into his faded brown kilts — he was wearing a colorless old jerkin with ragged short sleeves — and jammed his bare feet into worn gray scuffs. He looked about for a weapon, a club perhaps, and decided for the ancient triangular-shaped hatchet, rust-blackened and handled with a rough length of hickory. The sphere-shaped light, a pocket sun in Umpty parlance, went into one of his ancient kilt's pockets.

The trapdoor opened quietly, thanks to his repairs to the rotted wooden hinges, and he emerged into a tangle of dead limbs and leafy briars rimmed by thick hemlocks. A sliver of moon rode the western horizon to lighten the darkness faintly.

He ducked under the briars along the overgrown tunnel through living growth. Downhill the twisting way went, the narrow bed of a wet weather rill with rotted leaves and rounded exposed stones. Carefully he picked his way. A sound might betray him.

Halfway down the valley's forested slope he emerged into a more open area that spread for over a hundred feet from either bank of the boulder-bedded brook. He could see the faint winding trail that paralleled the stream, and further down the way a moving darker splotch . . . Would be the Exars . . .

Only after a long moment of searching, looking from the edges of his eyes for better vision, did he spot the shape of the woman sitting on the exposed root of a giant beech tree. She was huddled there, crying silently. And Hrli, behind a loose-barked old hickory's bole hesitated.

Could be she preferred that no one learn of her night's adventure. The nearest Umptown, with its four square miles of woodlot, orchards, and arable soil, must lie seven miles distant. That would be Umptown 773, his hometown. Over in the east, in Pennsylvania, the nearest area must be nine or ten miles.

Two hours' walking along the forest trails and then along a linking highway, and she should arrive near

sunrise . . . In a small community of two thousand people, with the majority of them totally unemployed, it took little to keep tongues wagging. With luck she might escape notice.

On the other hand she might welcome some friendly assistance, or an offer to guide her home. He wondered if . . .

There was a muffled scream, and now he saw that there were two shapes wrestling and striking in the pale darkness. No question now. The woman was in trouble. He ran toward them.

One of the Exar band of looters no doubt. Slipped away from the others and returned . . . He was beside them now, his hand on the shoulder of the cursing man-shape. The shoulder jerked away. He clamped the man's arm, twisted, and brought the man stumbling toward him.

He caught a glimpse of the woman's sprawled body. She was not struggling or moving. Apparently her assailant had stunned her with a series of slaps. Then he felt a flurry of awkward blows on his body.

Hrli's fist landed solidly on the shadowy skull, and then his left jolted into bony ribs. The man screamed, went to one knee, and went scrabbling away down the trail like some crippled beast.

The victory was so quick and easy that Hrli was left gasping. He took two steps after the fleeing attacker and then halted. Better see about the unconscious woman.

He went to her.

An hour later, in the old dugout, the girl was lying on the bunk that Hrli had constructed of green, unpeeled poles and small branches.

She was unharmed, save for a few bruises, and the print marks of her unseen assailant on her throat.

She was fair skinned and tawny-haired, taller than the average girl, but rounding out the mid-thigh, checkered, dark smock she wore quite adequately. She was studying him, he knew, through barely slitted green eyes.

For the past half hour she had been conscious. Hrli wondered how much longer she would continue the pretense.

"Why have you dragged me here," she demanded suddenly, both hands at her abused throat. "Your leader ordered you to leave me."

Hrli was stunned. Gratitude, this. Then he remembered that she could know nothing of his rescue attempt. Or of the brief fight there beside her unconscious body.

How to explain this to her? So she would be convinced, that is.

"You're wrong. I'm not an Exar. I'm from the university. Camped here, and I heard them leave you. Went down to investigate . . ."

His voice trailed off. She was eyeing him with a sort of hopeless disbelief that brought a lump to his stomach. Words weren't going to convince her. But he had to finish his explanation.

"Maybe it does sound funny. But it was like that. That brute had just knocked you out when I got there. I chased him away down the trail, and brought you here."

"Why?" Her green eyes were very wide and very skeptical. "Why bring me here?"

"Where else? Didn't dare show the light outside there. Thought I'd better check you for any wounds or broken bones."

"I'll just bet! Cozy little pig sty you have here," she said, her eyes running over the weather-stained shack's interior. "Only I wouldn't keep a pig in it, if I liked the pig!"

"You need stay here no longer," Hrli said stiffly. "I'll be glad to show you the trail to — wherever the Exars found you."

The girl laughed. She sat up on the improvised sleeping platform, keeping Hrli's patched old blue blanket across her knees.

"And what happens when I bring the state troopers or the cops down on you? I might have let the kidnapping go. You're mostly a scruffy lot. Look hungry. But not choking and slugging."

Hrli opened his mouth — closed it again. What was it she had said about bringing? *State troopers? Cops?* All archaic words, dating back to the mid-Twentieth Century. Also that ugly *slugging.*

"You mean the Umptown proctors or the Industros?" he asked.

"I suppose so. I don't really know the words." The strange hopeless look was back in her face. "How'd I ever land here anyhow?"

"Listen to me," Hrli said earnestly. "I'm telling the truth. Maybe I can help you . . . What happened to you? Are you Umpty or M-P?"

"There you go again. Umpty! All I can say is it sounds like nursery rhymes . . . Is this Mother Goose? Or am I — the goose?"

Hrli came to a quick decision. If the girl went wandering around in her present warped mental state she might end up in a re-education unit. She had read too many of the ancient atomic era romances, currently popular among Twenty-Second Century teenagers, and now, hysterical from her night's adventure, she was identifying herself with that unlovely period.

A few hours' rest and some hot food might zoom her out of it. Added to that was the certainty that she was convinced that he had attacked her down by the brook and dragged her here. Such an accusation, even though unproved, could diminish to zero his already slim chances of finding any sort of paying position.

"Look . . . Miss . . ." He hesitated, looking expectant.

"Elise Connor," she said crisply. "I suppose you're nameless?"

"Not at all. Dale Hrli." He settled back into the precariously bound-together chair of twisted branches and yawned. "Look. Do what you please. You're welcome to stay until daylight . . . I'm sleepy."

He closed his eyes and snicked off the pocket light sphere. There was no moonlight now, the western rim of trees had swallowed the shred of a moon, and the cabin was dark. He heard the girl gasp several times in what must have been choked sobs, and then she lay down again on the rough bed of branches.

"Knew you really wouldn't let me go," she whispered savagely.

"Oh?" Hrli grunted back. "S' all right."

After a time his pretense became reality, and he fell asleep.

When Hrli opened his eyes again it was well along in the forenoon. The rough chair's uneven back had ruined his back, he swore, wincing forward. Remembering, he glanced at the blanketed bunk and saw it was unoccupied.

So, she was gone. No telling what the outcome of his attempt to be of aid would be. Conceivably, should he be found guilty, he would have his mind stripped and be given an entirely new identity. It made his stomach wrench at the thought. In all the villages of America's unemployed millions there were re-educated men and women, aptly labeled the Reborn. They were pariahs.

It was to escape this total blanking of memories, this mental death, that lawbreakers escaped into the wilder areas to live a precarious animal-like existence. They became known as the Exars, and to them were ascribed many acts committed by "proper" villagers.

He went out through the trapdoor, heading for the brook's clean waters. A good scrub and some hot stew, heated over a stone-banked fire, and he could consider what must be done.

She was sitting beneath the old beech tree, her face clean and pink from the cold brook's sting, and she was smiling up at him.

"Good morning, Dale Hrli," she cried.

"You didn't go?"

"Apparently not. I got to remembering. I raked my nails across his face. You are unmarked . . . And you snore — not loud — but a snore."

She laughed, her wide green eyes bright.

"A man with dishonorable intentions would not have fallen asleep, would he?" she demanded.

Hrli grinned. He sat down on a low rock at the water's edge and fished a cake of pale orange soap from a crevice. He discarded his short-sleeved jerkin and set about scrubbing his face and torso.

When he had finished he dried carelessly on the coarse-woven fabric and from a pocket of his kilt pulled a packaged paper shirt of pastel blue. This he donned, after combing his thick dark hair, and went to join the girl.

"So," she accused, "hiding the soap . . . Now, have we any food?"

"Right away. Once I get the fire going . . . Have the cans in this sunken bucket— with the brook to cool them."

"Think of everything don't you? Sure you're not an outlaw?"

"You just cleared me," Hrli said. "Remember? Now what about yourself, Miss Connor?"

Hrli had his back turned as he heaped dry bits of bark and twigs together and turned the pocket torch's switch to lighter. An arc of flame shot out and ignited the tinder . . .

"Why not? Can't keep on pretending when I know nothing . . ." she

said. "It wasn't my fault that I'm here."

"Do you good to talk. Unless it's really bad. Trust me."

"I'm from another time. I found myself in this really dreamy body — I was tiny and blonde — yesterday. Last I remember was in 1973. John Truran, my fiance. had asked me to sit in on a test he was conducting at the University of Pennsylvania.

"John was testing two other students— both men. We all wore helmets and had to lie on cots. I remember an unpleasant humming.

"Then I awoke in a strange dormitory room, looking like this, and I heard women's voices in the hall . . . Discussing me.

"They were going to have great fun watching the reactions of a Twentieth Century girl's mind to modern conditions. They had lots of plans, all of them aimed at making me look ridiculous."

"So you slipped out and ran away," Hrli put in.

"Of course I did. And I am not sorry either. I planned to find out all I could before coming back. There was this bag with the shoulder strap, well-supplied with money — plastic isn't it? I was ashamed to wear this dress until I remembered Bikini suits."

"Bikini? — never mind," Hrli interjected.

"I walked a mile or so to get off-campus. Then I saw the towers and the jet-propelled passenger projectiles flashing by overhead . . . What keeps them up there, by the way?"

"The rippers? A single guide cable suspended by magnetic force in the towers runs through the ships. Like beads. Saves landing fields — passengers disembark on the towers."

The girl smiled. "I know. The elevator cage whisked us up in a second. A wonderful view. The old university is gone but the surroundings haven't changed.

"I got off north of Pittsburgh. I used to live near Sharon, but there is no such city. Only these villages, surrounded by gardens, and the grain and hay fields."

"The Umptowns, Miss Connor. All over the Earth it is like that. Ninety percent of us have no jobs. The others work five to twenty hours a week . . . An Umptown is as near self-sufficient as possible — but it's like living in the Eighteenth Century."

"You — you're one of the unemployed?"

Hrli turned from the fire, the steaming hot can of stew held by a stick through its bail. With his other hand he handed the girl a battered old frying pan and a shiny aluminum plate. He served them both on a flat brookside slab of gray rock.

"Unemployed?" he said, after a time. "Yes, I'm an Umpty. All I've ever possessed is coupons. Even our houses and furniture and clothing belonged to the village. That's why we're hungry for jobs.

"But about you. How did you get into the hands of Exars?"

Simple enough. I walked until darkness, wandering through a couple of your villages. Didn't dare ask

anything, or buy anything. Fortunately I had bought a sandwich and coffee at the tower shop.

"I suppose I should have gone to a hotel or found a room, but I saw everyone paying with coupons — and all I had was bills and plastic coins."

"M-P money." Hrli translated. "Employed persons, emps, have real money. *We* have coupons . . . They would have taken them gladly, however."

"And attracted attention to me? . . . I was more lost than ever. I started back toward the — ripper, is it? — and was passing through another village when those creatures seized me.

"I can still taste the greasy old rag they crammed into my mouth . . . Don't your crooks know about adhesive tape?"

Hrli chuckled. "Exars have no access to modern supplies, unless they steal them," he told her.

"Wait! Look!" The girl dropped her half-emptied plate of stew and stood up. "The cabin! It's on fire!"

He turned. Already flames were gouting up through the roof and licking at the dead limbs piled there to conceal the little shelter. In a short time all the surrounding woods might be ablaze.

"Goodbye blanket and extra clothing," Hrli said. "We'd better head for open country, and no delays."

"Exars?" the girl asked.

"Probably. Your faceless friend of last night perhaps."

Hrli left the fire and the useless cooking gear. He would never return again to this boyhood camping ground. They would be fortunate to escape the building forest fire, he was thinking. A lot of hemlocks and pines had been planted nearby, and it was dry.

He led the way upstream toward the nearest highway, and even as they ran a hail of small stones pelted them. Propelled from slings, no doubt. The Exars were adept with slingshots and arrows in their never-ending quest for game.

"Really — hate us!" the girl choked out, her legs pumping.

Hrli didn't answer. His skull was hurting in three or four places, and a stone had gashed his arm.

Fortunately the breeze was in their faces as they finally slowed to a wheezing walk, keeping the fire from racing on their heels. Two miles from the destroyed cabin a four-lane, resilient-surfaced highway slashed through the forest from east to west.

"North is Pymatuming Lake," Hrli said. "To the left — west — is Umptown 773. And to the right Uptown 652, with Industrial Area 24Z beyond that."

"I used to go fishing with my brother on Pymatuming," the girl said. "There was a causeway . . . but the nearest town will do."

"That's 773," Hrli said. He was wondering how to explain the girl to his neighbors and family. "Of course the ripper lies further east."

"I'm not ready to go back, Dale." She attempted a smile that was an utter zero. "No telling what they might want to do to me."

Hrli, for the first time, realized the strangeness of the experience that had come to him. He had been too busy before, what with the fire and dodging stones and running . . .

This woman, Elise Connor, had lived here — near here — two centuries before. She had lived in the era that saw atomic power born, and had watched, on the telescreen no doubt, the first rockets contact our moon . . .

Oddly enough her speech was modern, save for the anachronistic terms and ancient slang interlarding it. Yet he believed her. No mistaking the sincerity and half-hidden terror of her eyes.

"You want to spend a week or so studying history and getting oriented?"

The girl nodded. "I suppose I'll have to go back some time. John Truran's experiment must be tied in with this — but I'm not ready — not just yet."

"What's your identification — your M-P ident I presume it is — call for?" asked Hrli as they started eastward along the grassy berm of the highway.

She fumbled with the unfamiliar studs of the bag at her side, dilating a half-dozen compartments before she extracted the cards. They stopped briefly and Hrli read the cryptic symbols that she did not understand.

"Stl Tonr," he translated, "daughter of Tech Hld Tonr, Journalistic major . . . Psycho and ancient history, minors."

He nodded. "M-Y all right. With a Tech father you'll find work. The Employed look after their own. We Umpties are out."

"But," objected Elise, "I'm not this Estelle Toner, or whatever you called it. I'm Elise Connor."

"Confusing, isn't it? True. But as Stl Tonr, whose body you seem to be occupying temporarily, you're all right. Your credit pic is proof enough — you can draw all the credit units you may need."

"But isn't that dishonest?"

"You have to care for this body don't you? For yourself? This is all you have and the credit pic belongs to it."

She laughed. This time it was not forced.

"You lost me somewhere there, but I think I agree. I want to work this crazy affair out somehow . . . And thanks, Dale."

Hrli and Elise walked along together, without speaking again, for perhaps a mile. Two huge cargors, heaped high with bales of fragrant green hay, and a third empty cargor passed them. Elise was amazed at the hugeness, and the quietness of the electrically-powered carriers.

"Walking tour!" he suddenly burst out. "Quite often M-Ps, university students mainly, go wandering from Uptown to Rec areas on foot or on bicycles . . . Fad they lifted from your time period I believe."

"That's right. Europeans more than Americans. But we did too."

"Get you a pack and some walking shoes. Heavy scuffs like these maybe. I'll go ahead and get them from home. My sister will lend them to you."

"Then you sign it at the transient hostel and say the others will probably come straggling along tomorrow."

Elise stopped and frowned up at him.

"What others?"

"The non-existent other members of your party, Elise . . . Give you an excuse to wait a few days, and study at the library."

"And I'll be this — Stl Tonr?"

"You'd better. Credit pics are not transferable."

Elise shook back the tawny hair from her pleasantly square face and her eyes widened and flamed green. She straightened her back and stepped off at a faster pace.

"I love walking tours," she said.

In the afternoon after Elise Connor had signed into the transient hostel and made a few carefully rehearsed purchases, she *accidentally* ran across Hrli in the village's central wooded park.

Hrli seemed much taken with the young woman, and guided her about the wide, tree-shaded streets and into the garden areas. Elise was amazed at the buildings, and at the lack of motorized vehicles. She waited until they were in the dwarf fruit orchards.

"They're all single story and primitive looking — something like adobe . . . And no cars! Even bicycles are few . . . Back in our time everyone had a motor vehicle."

Hrli motioned toward a wooden platform nearby. From this spot, at the top of a knoll, they could see the town and the neat rows of trees, with the new green lines of garden crops between. They sat down. From here any approaching Umpty, or other, should be visible.

"You had six or eight percent unemployment, Elise," Hrli said. "Your Umpties could be given luxuries . . . I've read that they were even allowed to vote."

"Of course they were!" Elise was indignant. "Aren't you?"

"No. The five or six percent who work, the M-Ps, vote. We Umpties, the ninety-five percent, cannot. It's fair too. We'd run the nation into bankruptcy in a few years.

"That's why our houses are built of rammed earth and blocks, and why we raise most of our food. Umptowns are supposed to be self-sustaining. Of course the government supplies televiewers and tri-dis to us, and offers free educational courses."

"But — aren't there revolts? Or riots."

"Spacing the Umptowns two to four miles apart, with farmland intervening, was supposed to help eliminate that." Hrli shrugged. "Besides, even if we did rebel, and win, there's only so much work."

Elise wrinkled her nose and made an inelegant sound.

"I don't like your world, Dale," she said. "How about space? Have you colonized Mars or explored Venus?"

"Economically impractical," Hrli told her, "or so they say."

"If I ever get switched back," Elise said fervently, "to my own time, I'll stay there. John Truran can test out his time machine, or

exchanger or whatever it is, on someone else."

"We lack for nothing," Hrli admitted, reluctantly. "We have hospitalization — the ultimate in therapy. Many live to be a hundred and twenty."

"But it's a dead end, Dale! It's the Dark Ages, only worse. You're all peasants. Might as well be cattle, or chickens!"

Hrli wanted to protest — to tell her about the talented Umpties who, every year, won an M-P rating. But he could not. Too well he knew the deadly inertia that gripped most Umpties.

The nearing whir of a hoptor made them look up. This was no agricultural supervisor's work horse. It was a shiny bluish-red cabin job, a sportster with streamlined speed in its blurring vanes.

A hundred feet from the platform a grassy meadow opened between the orchard and the Umptown woodlot, and here the hoptor came gracefully to rest. Two young men, red-checked kilts matching, and sleeveless golden shirts identical,, came striding toward Elise and Hrli.

"I'm afraid," the girl said in a hushed voice. "They're from the university I left. I know it! Don't let them . . ."

"Afternoon," one of the strangers said, light blue eyes oddly pale in his bronzed long face. "We're looking for a — mental patient. May be using the name Stl Tonr."

"And you are?" Hrli asked.

"From the medical research department of UYA. Through negligence this patient escaped. Harmless, but she might starve, or make trouble.

"No strangers in your town since yesterday?"

Hrli was conscious of the girl's indrawn breath. Any inquiry at the transient hostel would prove him a liar if he denied her arrival there. Yet he could not believe that Elise was a psycho . . .

"Only myself and Els here. We arrived this morning. She's visiting for a couple of days . . . We attended specialist 782 together."

The light blue eyes danced lightly over them both, and the young man nodded. He turned to the other, stockier and darker, man. The second man was adjusting a glowing silvery tube, his right eye hidden behind a gray plastic shield.

"Checks," he said shortly. "Her all right."

The tanned young man came to the edge of the platform.

"Let's have no unpleasantness," he said softly to Hrli. "I don't know how you came into this but we'll forget that if you make no trouble."

"Don't let them, Dale. I want to stay here — with you."

Elise was clinging to Hrli now, and Hrli was sweating. These were M-Ps — wealthy at that to afford so luxurious a spinner. For an Umpty to offer resistance could end forever any hope of work.

"We'll let the town proctors decide," Hrli said. "Once your authority is established . . ."

"Was afraid of that," muttered the stranger. "Let him have it, Krn."

Hrli sensed a movement by the

fist. Two or three of those paralyn- second man. He caught a glimpse of a tiny black needler in the big tipped slivers could render a man helpless in seconds.

He swung the blue-eyed man between, as a shield. A fist jolted his ribs and he chopped, hand-edge, at the other's neck. A bee's sting, and then another. He went limp — helpless.

Krn and the blue-eyed man led a protesting Elise to the hoptor.

Apparently the landing of the hoptor, less than half a mile from the village, had gone unnoticed. Inspectors and agro officials were always dropping out of the sky, or wheeling into the Umptowns in official electrocabs. And Hrli had slumped down beside the old wooden platform on the side opposite Umptown 773.

Fortunately he could feel nothing.

Sluggishly his brain puzzled over what he was to do next. To go to the authorities now, after the girl was gone, would be useless. The M-Ps — and she was M-P — answered to rules and regulations differing greatly from the Umptowns'.

By concealing her identity, and aiding her, he had probably broken a lot of their laws. Perhaps the girl's story — her belief — that she came from the past, was an insane fantasy.

Yet why had the two men needled him, when he requested proof, and carried her off?

His legs and arms were cramping. Pain was a good sign. Feeling was returning. He was lying on a sharp stone, he discovered, that was gouging into his right hip.

Another long wait, actually only a few moments, and he was getting painfully to his feet by clinging to the platform's rough planks. With every movement his stiffness abated.

By the time he had recrossed the orchard and threaded his way among the gardens to the village he was feeling himself again.

Then he was on Vhy Street and approaching the comfortable four-room dwelling that his grandfather, Nthan Hrli, had built fifty years before.

A sleek black sedan, its electric motor humming softly, was parked before the house. Hrli felt suddenly hollow and weak. Bitterness flooded up into his throat.

After him already. The M Ps must have passed word along. Probably a law officer, with an Umptown proctor for good measure.

Fleetingly he thought of flight — of escaping into the forests an joining the Exars. He shook his head. Better face it.

And then his mother, graying and plumply pretty, came to the door. She smiled and motioned for him to hurry.

"Wondered if you'd ever get home," she said hastily. "He's an M-P from Industrial 24Z over in Pennsylvania. Your record at school was so good . . . Offers you apprenticeship."

He'd spent twenty-one years working and studying — hoping for this very rare opportunity. Few in-

deed were the Umpties who made the transition. This meant money, and a chance to advance . . .

Abruptly he remembered Elise Connor, and the plans he had made to search for her.

Couldn't he find her easier if he too became an M-P? Only a matter of months — possibly, weeks. Might be the best solution.

"I don't know, Mother," he said.

The big man, immaculate in spotless gray kilts and pale blue tunic, stepped out past his mother. He was a big man, not less than seven feet in height, his squarely handsome face topped by a cropped mass of tawny hair. His hand was extended, gripped that of Hrli, and he bore the younger man along toward the car.

"Feel sure you will like your work at 24Z. You specialized in micro repair. Need several. Supervisor due to retire. May be you'll qualify."

Hrli stopped.

"I would like a little time," he said. "There's something I would like to settle first."

The big man chuckled.

"I think I know what you mean ... Someone in the car I want you to meet. May solve your problem. Mine too."

Hrli could see now that the car was occupied. The M-P swung open the rear door and crowded Hrli inside. Hastily he slammed the door and went back toward Hrli's mother. He was shaking his head as he walked.

"Dale!" Elise Connor said.

"Elise!" he echoed.

"The job is good," the girl said breathlessly. "Father said it was the least he could do for you . . . Saving me from that awful Exar and looking out for me.

"Krn and Brt, they are the two upperclassmen who found me, gave me anti-inhibitor once we were aboard the hoptor. But they wouldn't come back to you."

"I don't understand, Elise, but I am glad you are safe."

"Stop interrupting — and my name really is Stl Tonr — but I remember all about Elise Connor . . . And the students in psy therapy who used a memory inhibitor and fed me those old memorium tapes just for laughs — am I going to fix them!"

Hrli was beginning to understand. Tampering with the human mind, whether by edutapes or through blanking and re-education, was a highly technical science. Undergraduates in psy therapy did not experiment on unsuspecting fellow students — unless they courted expulsion or worse.

No wonder the two in the hoptor had needled him and escaped. There would be a major effort to keep this escapade from being discovered. The price of his secrecy would be the job in 24Z.

He wasn't proud. All he asked was the opportunity . . .

"I think Father is going to like you," Stl Tonr was saying. "He says you showed initiative. And imagination. Dale, are you listening?" she questioned.

"To every word," Hrli said.

END

COMETS VIA THE VJSEH

by ROBERT S. RICHARDSON

Where do comets come from? From outer space? The moon? Which moon?

There are certain hypotheses that apparently are destined to go on haunting astronomy forever. They lie dormant for years, then suddenly pop up again embellished with modern improvements.

A few that come to mind are: the asteroids were formed from a primeval planetary explosion; the moon is egg-shaped, which has caused its atmosphere to collect on the lunar farside; sunspots emit rays that activate various phenomena; the solar system is passing through a cosmic dust cloud — thus explaining some effect that can't be explained some easier way. Doubtless the reader can think of many more.

One of the most tenacious of these old reliables is the hypothesis of comets produced by Jovian ejection, an idea that seems to have originated with the famous French mathematician Joseph Louis La Grange toward the end of the 18th century. Beginning in 1884 this mechanism was evoked by R.A. Proctor and others to account for the apparent affinity between Jupiter and the aphelia of the short-period comets. Although there is no hard-and-fast definition of just how short the period of a short-period comet is supposed to be, the term is generally applied to comets with a period of revolution of less than 200 years.

Jupiter revolves in a nearly circular orbit at a distance from the Sun of 484 million miles or 5.2 astronomical units (a.u.). Of the 94 known comets of short-period, 60 per cent have the aphelia of their orbits from 5 to 7 astronomical units of the Sun, or within about 1 astro-

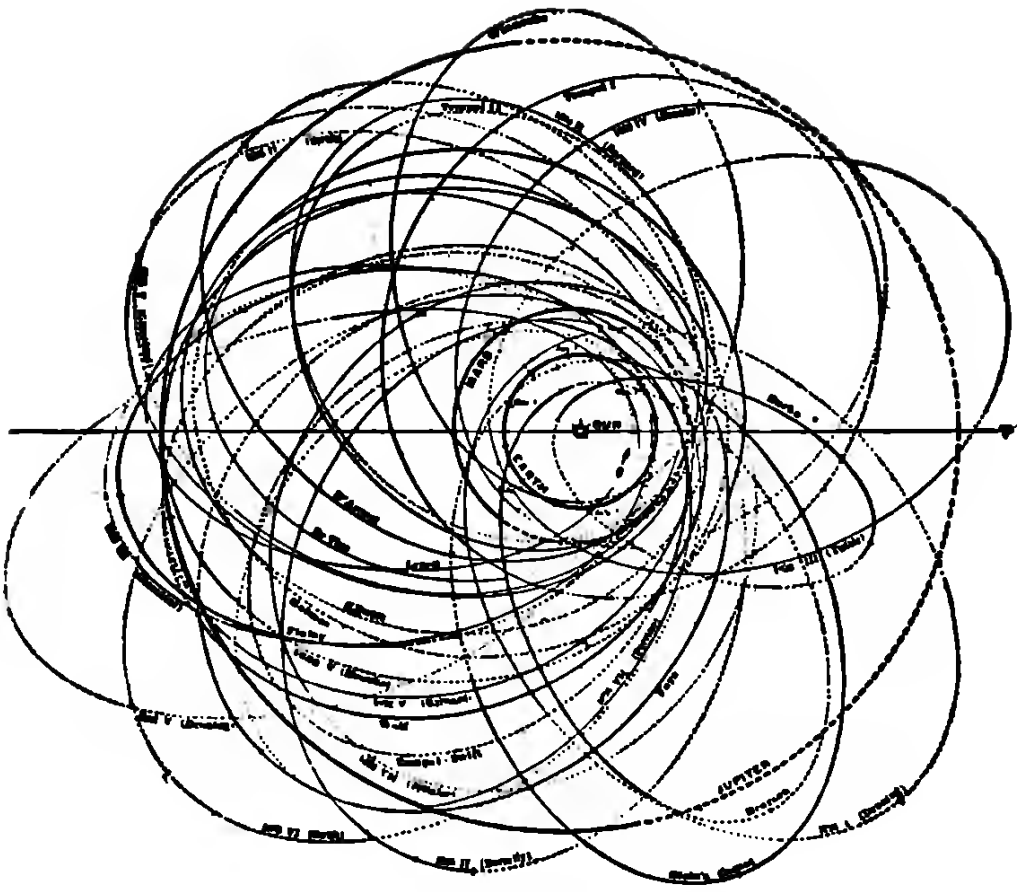

Fig. 1. Some members of Jupiter's family of comets. Notice how many of these orbits have their ophelio (farthest point from the sun) near the orbit of Jupiter. There are so many that the comets of short-period are undoubtedly related to Jupiter in some way.
Courtesy of *Popular Astronomy*.

nomical unit of the orbit of Jupiter (Fig. 1). These are the comets often characterized as the members of Jupiter's "family." Originally they were supposed to have been moving in huge elongated orbits but as the result of a close approach to Jupiter they were "captured," and henceforth moved in abbreviated orbits with periods of from 4 to 10 years. (Fig. 2). The theory sounds attractive and we know for a fact that certain comets have been brought under Jupiter's domination by the capture process. Its chief weakness is that Jupiter's family is far larger than can be explained by the capture theory, about 100,000 times too large according to some critics.

Stated another way, the lifespan of a short-period comet is so brief that Jupiter could not possibly capture new comets fast enough to replace the old ones that are fading away.

Yet the short-period comets un-

doubtedly are related to Jupiter in *some* way. If they are not members of his family by capture, what then is the connection? The answer is almost too easy: they are members of his family because they were *born* of Jupiter.

(If we continue to ascribe the act of cometary procreation to Jupiter it begins to look as if we are going to become involved in serious anatomical difficulties. We might evade it by transforming Jupiter to Juno, whom the Greeks regarded as the female Jupiter or queen of heaven. Probably the best course is to quit anthropomorphizing Jupiter and make it simply a *planet.*)

There are several attractive features about the idea of comets originating on the surface of Jupiter by volcanic eruption (Fig. 3). The ejection hypothesis seemed quite plausible a hundred or even 50 years ago when the semi-sun picture of Jupiter prevailed. It is surprising how even the most conservative members of the profession accepted this semi-sun conception of Jupiter practically without question.

Thus the great Simon Newcomb, writing about 1877, remarked: "Of late years it has been noticed that the physical constitution of Jupiter seems to offer more analogies to that of the sun than to that of the earth . . . The interior of Jupiter seems to be the seat of an activity so enormous that we can attribute it only to a very high temperature, like that of the sun." But if the interior of Jupiter were at the same temperature as the interior of the sun the planet would promptly explode. (This is the same Simon Newcomb who demonstrated the impossibility of building a flying machine!)

The image of Jupiter as a semi-sun lingered on until about 1926, when radiation measures with the vacuum thermocouple revealed the temperature of the visible cloud surface was — 138° C. The outer atmosphere of the planet, instead of being nearly self-luminous, was colder than dry ice. That Jupiter was not so hot as generally supposed was shown much earlier, when about 1899 C.V. Boys, an English physicist, tried to detect heat from Jupiter with his radio-micrometer attached to a reflecting telescope. From his negative result he concluded that the surface temperature of Jupiter must be less than 100° C. But his work seems to have passed unnoticed among astronomers.*

It must be emphasized that these temperatures refer only to the visible surface, or outer atmosphere, of Jupiter. When it comes to conditions *below* the visible surface there is still nothing but conjecture. From the violent changes observed in the cloud belts, however, we infer the existence of powerful sources of energy upon the surface. E. Schoenberg, from a study of all the available data, concludes there is strong

*Astronomers for some reason seem peculiarly reluctant to recognize new developments in their field. They practically had to have the radio telescope forced upon them, and even today most of them manifest only a casual interest in space travel. The Mount Wilson Observatory was still using telephones with a crank on the side as late as 1940

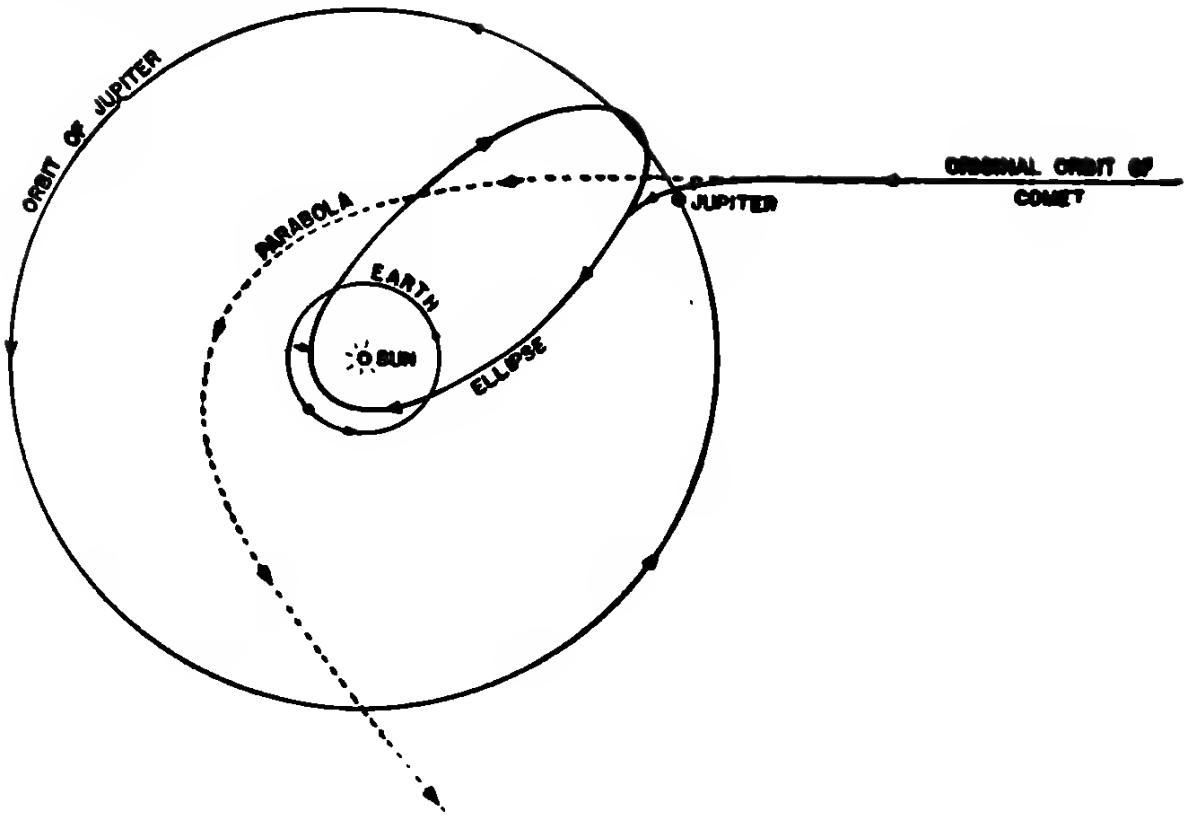

Fig. 2. A comet approaches the sun along an orbit that was originally nearly parabolic. Instead of continuing around the sun in a parabolic orbit shown by the dotted line, as the result of a close encounter with Jupiter it is deflected into a short period elliptical orbit. Notice the new orbit is retrograde (clockwise) and that its aphelion point lies very close to Jupiter's orbit.

Adapted from *L'Astronomie* by L. Rudaux and G. de Vaucouleurs

and continued volcanic activity. The presence of powerful sources of energy on Jupiter receives support from the unanticipated discovery of radio emission from the planet in 1955.

As we follow some of these violent disturbances in the cloud belts with a small telescope it is easy to believe in the ejection hypothesis. But if we examine the hypothesis in depth, as the psychologists say, we begin to have grave doubts.

One of the minimum requirements of the hypothesis is that the ejecta from a volcano free itself from the surface of Jupiter. But the velocity of escape from Jupiter is 37 miles per second, about 5 times the escape velocity from the Earth. Do natural physical and chemical processes exist capable of attaining such high volocities by volcanic eruption? Even if material were ejected with escape velocity that is not going to make a comet out of it necessarily. First it must penetrate the atmosphere and have enough velocity left after reaching outer space to go into orbit around the Sun. On the Earth

we accomplish this by keeping a rocket in powered flight until it is through the bulk of the atmosphere and then accelerating it to escape velocity. But in trying to orbit a particle via volcano we are dealing not with a rocket but with a projectile.

In the last thirty years various authorities have estimated the depth of the Jovian atmosphere as somewhere between 100 and 10,000 miles. A projectile receives an initial powerful impulse after which it is on its own. A. Corlin finds that a particle at the surface of Jupiter would need an initial velocity of 370 miles per second to penetrate the atmosphere and escape. Considerations such as these raise such formidable difficulties that proponents of the ejection hypothesis have been compelled to abandon it as unrealistic.

But are we necessarily limited to Jupiter as a source of comets? Why wouldn't some other planet do as well? What's the matter with the moon?

Escape velocity from the moon is only 1.5 miles per second. The moon has no significant atmosphere now and probably never has had one. The battered condition of its surface indicates it was once the scene of violent activity of some sort. Why, the moon is just what we need for comets!

Then we remember the *fact* that the short-period comets are related to Jupiter and not to the Earth-moon system. If there were only some way of moving the moon out to Jupiter . . . But aren't we raising a problem where no problem exists? Jupiter already has four big moons of its own. Why not use them?

This is starting point for the new ejection hypothesis of the origin of comets recently advanced by Professor S. K. Vsekhsviatskii of the astronomical observatory, Kiev, U.S.S.R. He has transferred the source of comets about a million miles from Jupiter to Io, Ganymede, Europa and Callisto. And what a difference it makes! No need now to worry about an impossibly high escape velocity. No atmosphere to penetrate. And we can still account for Jupiter's comet family!

Vsekhsviatskii and his group consider it highly significant that when the motion of several members of the Jupiter family is projected backward they are found to have been very close to Jupiter *prior* to discovery. Notable examples are the comets Lexell, Brorsen, Wolf 1, Brooks 2, Giacobini-Zinner and Oterma, all of which have passed through Jupiter's satellite system. So far as known, the record close approach to Jupiter occurred on July 20, 1886, when Brook's comet came within 55,000 miles of the planet's surface. Vekhsviatskii remarks that such cases speak directly in favor of the ejection of comets almost "before the very eyes of the observer."

We have noted that the ejection hypothesis receives strong support from the brief lifespan of the short-period comets. According to Vsekhsviatskii's data, in 225 years Jupiter lost 27 out of an original family of 68 comets. Suppose we made Jupiter a present of 1000 comets. At this

rate of obsolescence they would fade away as follows:

Table I. Rate of Cometary Fading

Time (years)	Number of Comets
0	1,000
10	978
100	799
500	325
1,000	106
2,000	11

If no replacements were available after 3,000 years Jupiter would be left with a family consisting of 1.18 comets, about the same as the average number of children in the family of a Harvard graduate. If short-period comets wear out at this rate their contained presence in the solar system is certainly hard to understand.

But *do* comets wear out at this rate?

There is no general agreement on this point. The brightness of a comet is an intrinsically difficult quantity to measure accurately even under the best of circumstances. Faint telescopic comets generally appear as a hazy cloud, without tail or nucleus, bearing no resemblance to the spectacular picture of a comet envisaged by the public. In the past many of the cometary magnitudes that have been published are hardly more than educated guesses at their overall brightness. According to Elizabeth Roemer of the U.S. Naval Observatory, Flagstaff Station, estimates of brightness for the same object determined at the same instant with different instruments and by different techniques can easily differ by 6 magnitudes, corresponding to a 250-fold difference in luminosity. If trained observers differ so widely, how much faith can we put in descriptions of a comet made 1000 years ago by terrified witnesses who

Fig. 3. Rapid motions in the cloud belts indicate violent activity below the visible surface of Jupiter. Recently observations made at the 200-inch Hale telescope with a new detector system indicate that Ganymede, Jupiter III, is losing more energy than it can be acquiring from the sun. The origin of the satellite's excess of radiation is unexplained.

This photograph of Jupiter and Ganymede with its shadow was taken in blue light at the 200-inch telescope. Photograph courtesy Mount Wilson and Palomar Observatories.

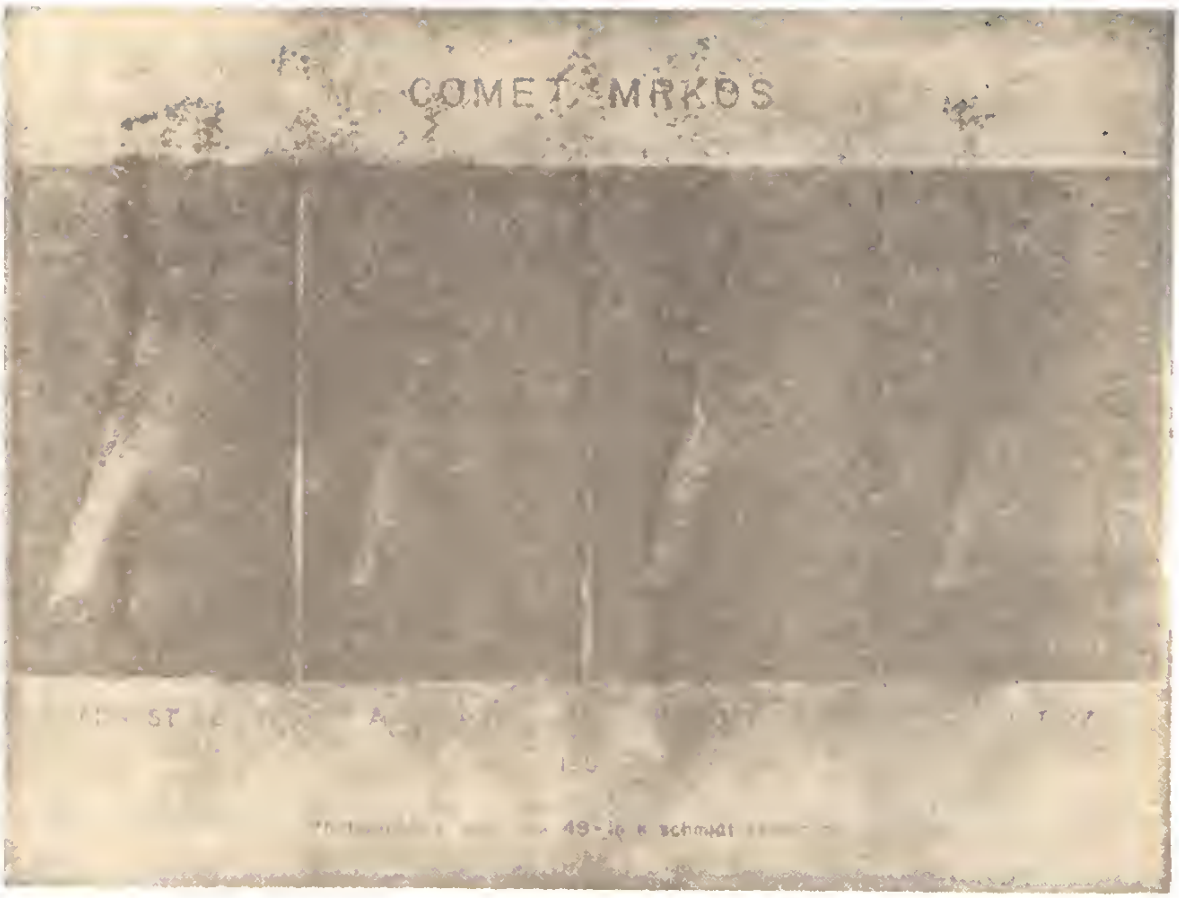

Fig. 4. Comet Mrkos was an unexpected naked-eye comet sighted on the morning of August 2, 1957, by the Czech astronomer Antonin Mrkos. The various streamers emerging from the coma *indicate* disintegration, but the exact nature of physical processes in comets is still unknown.

were convinced the end of the world was at hand? (Fig. 4).

N. T. Bobrovnikoff of the Perkins Observatory, Ohio, has made an investigation of the brightness of Wolf 1, a faint comet discovered in 1883 by Max Wolf at Heidelberg. This object was selected for study as there has probably been more work done on Wolf 1 than any other comet with the exception of Encke's. According to Vsekhsviatskii, Wolf 1 has been fading at the rate of 0.5 to 1.0 magnitudes per revolution, until now it is barely on the limit of telescopic visibility. On the other hand, Bobrovnikoff from a careful inter-comparison of the absolute magnitudes of Wolf 1 at its six returns from 1884 to 1925 was unable to find any evidence of fading. He notes that if the comet is *fading* as time *increases*, then it should be *brightening* as time *decreases*. If it is fading as fast as Vsekhsviatskii claims, then Wolf 1 should have been visible to the naked eye in 1880, and could hardly have es-

caped detection until 83 years later. To which the ejection hypothesis people would reply that on June 8, 1875, Wolf 1 was within the satellite system of Jupiter, and couldn't possibly have been discovered earlier. It hadn't been born yet!

F. L. Whipple has recently calculated changes in the brightness of certain periodic comets, derived from Vsekhsviatskii's data, based upon his concept advanced in 1950 of the icy cometary nucleus. He finds that when the theory is applied literally the nuclei disintegrate to nothing. Readers may be interested in the predicted date of demise of some selected comets, as follows:

Table 2. Predicted Death Dates of Comets

Comet	Death Date
Pons-Winnecke	1958-1962
Tuttle	1959
Wolf 1	1964-1971
Kopff	1966
Brooks 2	1967
Faye	1967
Whipple	1967
Encke	1993
Halley	2458

Since the average period of Halley's comet is 76 years, according to these figures this famous object will only be seen for another half dozen apparitions after its next return in 1986.

The hypothesis of extensive vulcanism on the giant satellites of Jupiter is of interest in connection with some observations on Ganymede (J III) made with the 200-inch Hale telescope in 1963*. Since these observations could conceivably provide the proponents of the ejection hypothesis with new ammunition, we might as well beat them to it by mentioning it here. To anyone who wishes to use this material as the basis for a story I hereby relinquish all my right, title and interest.

The development of advanced quantum detector systems has recently made it possible to measure much lower brightness temperatures than have previously been recorded. Measures with such a detector on the radiation from Ganymede indicate that this satellite is losing more energy than it can be acquiring from the Sun. This is on the assumption that the shape of its spectral-energy curve corresponds to that of a perfect radiator or "black body." If the assumption is wrong, the implied departures from the theoretical black body curve are great enough to suggest the presence of an atmosphere, except that no atmosphere for Ganymeade has been detected spectroscopically. If on the other hand the assumption is correct, then the satellite "possesses an intrinsic heat source of incomprehensible magnitude."

Now this puzzling observation finds a natural explanation in the Vsekhiatskii Jovian Satellite Ejection Hypothesis, which henceforth shall be known as the VJSEH. *Ganymede is covered with volcanoes belching fire and brimstone.* What else?

END

*Bruce C. Murray, Robert L. Wildey, and James A. Westphal, 1964, **Astrophysical Journal**, Vol. 139, p. 986.

CHOICE OF WEAPONS

by RICHARD C. MEREDITH

Illustrated by MORROW

All of Earth's eons had spawned them —now they were thrust against an enemy from outside of Time itself!

I

There was a stand of small oaks just to Grant's left, their limbs barely moving in the afternoon breeze, beyond them a thicker brush, a tangle of vines and saplings and broken limbs. And beyond the thicket was a game trail.

It was from there the sound came, from the path down which the doe had traveled a few minutes before.

Moving toward the trail, carefully, noiselessly, the young man in the pale green coveralls clicked the safety off his rifle. He stopped and listened again.

The buck chose that moment to dash out of the thicket, leap a fallen branch and rush past the oaks. David Grant swung up his rifle and squeezed off a shot, quickly worked the bolt, and fired again before the deer vanished. Then he kicked a

fresh shell into the chamber, shook his head wearily, and cursed himself for his slowness.

For a few long moments he stood there, a cigarette unconsciously placed between his lips, looking at the place among the trees where he had last seen the deer, listening to the wind rising among the higher branches, smelling the crispness in the air of tonight's approaching freeze. He had not moved when he heard, or rather felt, the sound.

It was an extremely low note sung by a pipe organ as big as a mountain, a note whose volume was increasing, swelling like the inward rushing breakers on the ocean shore. It was an unpleasant, un-nerving sound, and one wholly out of place in the forest thirty miles from the nearest town.

"Now what the hell?" David Grant asked himself aloud — as the forest vanished.

II

There was light for no more than five seconds, giving Grant just time enough to see that he was in a large circular room. Then he was left standing, ten or twelve feet from the wall, in total darkness that lasted for three or four minutes.

There had been no sensation of transition, no feeling of sleep or unconsciousness. The change had been as smooth and even as the well edited shift of a motion picture.

And for a while that was the sensation Grant had, that of being a spectator at some strange event whose purpose was unknown to him, some alien game he had wandered into where he stood waiting for another spectator to explain the rules.

Four minutes had passed when without warning the light returned. It filled the large room with a shadowless radiance that came from the quilted-looking metal of the ceiling ten feet above.

The room was circular, at least a hundred and twenty feet in diameter, perhaps as much as a hundred and forty. The single circular wall and the featureless floor, made of what looked like aluminum, were smooth and seamless, joined so subtly that Grant was unable to quite tell where the floor ended and the wall began. It was as if the room were a huge aluminum bowl with a quilted metallic pot holder placed across its top — except for the partitions that rose from the floor in the center of the room. These were thin sheets of metal, standing on end, a good dozen of them, placed in apparently random positions and of random heights.

Stepping back to the wall, the dark-haired hunter shifted his rifle, a British .303 Enfield, to his left hand. He ran the tips of his fingers down the surface of the wall, feeling only the smooth metal and a slight warmth as if a bright sun had been shining on it, or, he thought, like the warmth of living flesh. It felt like aluminum. A rap of his knuckles against the wall proved it to be no hollow shell. The sound was of thickness and solidity.

As he turned back and swept his eyes across the room again, Grant

heard a sound like a stifled cough. It came from the center of the room, among the partitions.

"Who's there?" he yelled. A strange, uneasy sensation climbed his spine and ruffled the short hair on the back of his neck. He shifted the rifle back to his right hand, his index finger closing around the trigger.

There was no answer.

He thumbed the safety off and began slowly walking toward the center of the room, holding the rifle one-handed, its butt-plate resting against his right hip.

"I said, who's there," he repeated, lounder and more slowly. For answer came a sound like a feminine sob of fear, half caught and muffled behind a hand.

"Look," Grant said, advancing toward the source of the sound, "I won't hurt you." The woman's voice sobbed again.

He found her half kneeling behind one of the larger partitions, a dark complexioned woman of middle age whose eyes were wide with fear as she looked up at him. Her cheeks were pale. Her mouth opened and closed as if she were trying to speak, but was unable. Her empty hands worked nervously.

The frightened woman was dressed in a costume such as Grant had seen in books and movies. It was the costume that had been worn in ancient Egypt, of the time when the pharaohs ruled the world.

A wrap-around skirt fell across her knees in wide folds and showed her calves as she knelt. A transparent cape was flung across her shoulders and breasts. Around her neck was a golden collar, studded with glittering gems, and on her head she wore a huge, plumed headdress whose ornate symbolism escaped Grant. She might have been a Hollywood version of an aging queen of ancient Egypt. There was still in the bones of her face and the slimness-turned-thinness of her body the remnants of a passed beauty. Something about her smacked of authenticity. She really did look the part.

Beside her, sitting on the living warmth of the metal floor was a little girl of eight or ten years old. She was nude. Her skin was the color of cream or finely polished marble. She simply sat there, cross-legged, with her hands folded in her lap, as if unaware of Grant and the woman who knelt beside her and sobbed. Her large green-brown eyes were wide open, staring, glassy, as if blind. Her round, almost chubby face was framed in short cropped brown hair. It was as void of expression as a human face can be. She made no response when Grant's hand touched her shoulder.

When his fingers brushed the warm skin of the deaf-mute girl's shoulder the feeling was something like that of an electric shock — a strange feeling, yet pleasant. Grant looked at the child for a long, long moment before moving his hand. While kneeling there he thought that she felt the touch — felt that and much more. In a way she reminded him of an Oriental mystic who had finally achieved Nirvana.

had reached communion with the over-mind who is God.

That was what she reminded him of, but he knew that she was not that. He did not know what she was.

"What is this?" he said softly, looking down at them and not really expecting an answer.

The woman looked back up at him, her eyes filled with fear. She feebly shook her head in the ageless custom of negation.

"Do you understand me?" he asked.

The woman spoke, but in a language Grant had never heard before.

"Can you speak English?" he asked.

Her reply was unintelligible . . . and choked off by a wide-eyed scream.

Grant spun, bringing his rifle up, and caught a distorted glimpse of a huge bearded man, rough, scarred, hairy and naked. A huge fist smashed against his cheek, knuckles cutting flesh to the bone, and Grant spun backward.

Blackness attempted to swallow him. He stumbled, his feet and legs shifting of their own to support his half limp weight. As he fought to hold on to consciousness and bit his lower lip to keep from vomiting, Grant saw the giant's right hand swing toward his stomach. The glint of chipped flint was in his hand.

Butt first, the rifle in Grant's hand came down suddenly across the giant's hairy wrist. The polished brass of the butt-plate smashed against the paleolithic flint knife. Sharp stone shattered, fragments slashing into the savage's hand. Roaring and stumbling backward, swinging his injured hand and showering droplets of blood, the giant flared at Grant with fire and hatred in his eyes.

Grant tasted the warm saltiness of his own blood in his mouth. He saw the naked savage through a red-tinted fog, but remained standing and conscious. Swinging the rifle into firing position from the hip, holding it half like a firearm and half like a spear, Grant took an awkward step toward the giant, jabbing the air with the weapon. The other's bleeding hand hung limp at his side. He seemed to sense that Grant could kill him, and simply stood looking at him with open hatred, an animal snarl on his broad lips.

"What kind of masquerade party is this?" Grant asked himself. His lips were numb and bleeding.

"Soo tha'm wha'tam," a female voice answered.

Grant looked across his left shoulder to see the head of a very pretty girl. Her hair was tinted a pale shade of green, her face made up in the same color. She was looking at him across the top of one of the partitions. "I's wonderen, dag," she said slowly, a strange lilt to her speech. "To hang, am I invite'? I like . . . *look ou'!* she suddenly screamed.

Turning, Grant saw the giant leaping toward him — just before the room was plunged into total darkness.

Dropping to his knees in the sudden blackness, Grant swung the rifle toward him, butt first, clubbing where his retinas retained an image of a leaping savage.

There was the thud of wood and metal meeting flesh, and a twisting jar that tore the rifle from Grant's hands. The voices of two women screamed in the darkness.

A huge body struck the metal floor. It writhed and thrashed and cursed in a language that had been ancient when the Sumerians first dwelt within walls. A flailing arm, brutish, hairy, struck Grant's chest as he attempted to rise.

Grant grabbed a partition and hauled himself erect. Then he awkwardly swung his booted foot in the direction of the savage's ragged breathing. His foot struck something — the savage's neck and chin — and there was a brief choking — half moan, half scream — then silence.

Coughing, spitting blood, cursing softly, Grant gently touched his aching jaw with his finger tips. No bones were broken.

"Ho, dag," the girl's voice said hesitantly. "Doid you kill he?"

"I don't know," Grant answered. He was unsteady on his feet, supporting himself on the partition. "He damned near killed me."

"Who'm he?" the girl's voice asked from the darkness, skipping across the words she spoke like a flat stone skipping across water. "To hang!" she said emphatically. "Who'm you? An' wha' doed you mean 'bou' a masquerade party?"

"Nothing, really," Grant said. He was wondering where anyone could have picked up an accent like hers. He had heard English spoken in just about every possible manner, but never as she spoke it. He said, "My name's David Grant. I'm an engineer from Atlanta, up here doing a week end of hunting. I don't have the damnedest idea what's going on here. Do you?"

"I'm Yandragordo'shel," she said slowly, her voice tinkling like Chinese bells. "You sure talk odded! Am we at Menka'?"

"You who?" Grant wished he could have seen her face for a little longer before the lights went out. "I'd say you're the one who talks funny. I've never heard of Menka'. Is it in Georgia?"

"Never heard?" the girl said indignantly. "Siva! I don' believe't. I'm from Chawk of th'Empire. A full h'Lark in the Igra. I even sleeped wi' hes Virility, th'Kopmen, once. Who'm you and wha'tam this?"

III

Grant stood for a long moment in the darkness, listening to the coarse, uneven breathing of the unconscious giant, to the faint sobs of the Egyptian-looking woman, tasting his own blood in his mouth. He thought about the green-haired girl, and where she had come from.

Or when.

"I don't know what kind of game this is," he said slowly, "but I think I'm beginning to follow the outlines of it. And the next question I ask: What year is it?"

"You crazy, dag?" the girl said

slowly. "You'm abs'lute to know wha' year 'tam."

"No argument," Grant said harshly. "What year is it?"

"Two-four-three," the girl answered slowly, her voice puzzled.

"Two-forty-three what?"

"Don' bubble me, dag."

"What era?" Grant said.

"Two-four-three of th'Empire, bamp!" the girl said angrily. "Sival"

Then the light returned.

The very pretty girl with a tint of green to her hair and skin and a strange way of talking was not nude when Grant saw her step around the partition into his view. She was not quite nude, but she was close enough to it that Grant would have said she was.

Her green-tinted hair was cut short and curved in, ending just below her ears. It framed in loose curls a face that was very pretty, despite the coloring of her cheeks. Wisps of hair fell down her forehead to her dark, arching eyebrows. Below this her face was oval, her eyes gray, her lips full stained dark green. She looked to be between 25 and 30 years old. Her green-dyed body was lush, beautiful, mature, long limbed and curvy. It was exposed except for a short skirt of dangling strings of alternately black and white beads. The beads hung loosely from a thin golden belt that clasped at her hips, and fell no more than a foot. A tiny golden buckle glittered just below her navel. Completing the unlikely costume were high-laced green sandals, multiple strings of black and white necklaces that skittered across her full breasts when she moved, and a golden bracelet. Perched atop her head was a small peaked cap of dark green felt with a long peacock's plume fluttering above. In her hand she carried a tiny bag of green wire mesh. She was smiling an odd smile.

"Wha'tam wrong *tyepyer*?" she asked, looking boldly into Grant's eyes.

"What empire?" was all that Grant could say. He turned to look at the others. The paleolithic giant lay unconscious on the floor, the Egyptian woman knelt and sobbed, the strange child seemed unaware of the others.

"What'tam this all, Davidgrant?" the girl asked. She sat down on the metal floor in a flowing, sensual motion. She, too, was looking at the others. "I wan' to know where I'm," she said angrily. *"Gdye?"*

He said after a while, "If you don't know I can't help you. I don't know either. I really don't have any idea. What did you say your name was?" He found it almost impossible to keep his eyes away from her, but she did not seem to mind his stare. Rather she seemed to welcome it, as if it were due her beauty — which, Grant told himself, maybe it was. Still, his moral standards were those of a small southern town. He could not sit easily in the presence of an all but naked beauty.

"Yandragordo'shel," she said, smiling at Grant's uneasiness. "Mos' peop call me Yandra. Bu' wha'tam this place we'm in?"

"I don't know," he said looking up at the ceiling. "I thought — "'

A sound from outside the partitioned area brought him to his feet, his rifle in his hands.

Twenty or thirty feet from where Grant stood, walking toward the partitions, was a tall, blond young man.

He wore the plumed helmet and scale armor, the leather and brass of a centurion of Imperial Rome, and he was carrying a limp human form in his arms.

Grant silently stepped forward.

"He'm very handsome," Yandra said under her breath. "I'll bet he'm strong too. He look like a good bubble."

The young Roman soldier came to a sudden stop when he saw Grant standing among the partitions. Carefully lowering his burden to the floor, he slipped his short sword from its sheath at his side. For a long moment he stood looking at Grant, his legs spread apart, poised to attack or defend.

"*Salve*," the Roman said slowly.

In that moment Grant wished he could remember his Latin, to speak to the intense looking young man who stood before him with drawn gladius. He was sure he would understand no other language.

Carefully leaning the rifle against a partition, Grant spread his arms in the gesture of defenselessness. He advanced toward the Roman. Yandra, who was obviously carrying no weapon, followed a few steps behind.

"Do you know any Latin?" Grant asked out of the corner of his mouth.

Yandra answered with a laugh.

It was the girl's tinkling, bell-like laughter that caught the young warrior's attention. His stare shifted from Grant to her. His eyes opened in not unpleasant surprise and something that might have been a smile flickered across his face.

Then he looked back at Grant and his face hardened.

Grant cautiously approached and knelt beside the figure the Roman had placed on the floor, an unconscious oriental girl. He found no sign of injury. Perhaps she had fainted upon finding herself in this place, whatever it was, and had been discovered by the young Roman in that condition.

She was probably no more than twenty, slender and pretty as only orientals can be. Her clothing was a single colorful garment that wrapped around her. It was probably homespun, though clean and well cared for. There were neither pins nor buttons in her clothing. To Grant's inexperienced eyes she could have been a Chinese peasant girl from any period of history within the past four thousand years.

He lifted her in his arms, finding her surprisingly light, and carried her inside the area of the partitions, leaving lovely Yandra and the Roman officer behind to appraise each other.

"*Absit invidia*," he heard the centurion say slowly.

Gently laying the girl on the warm floor beside the still frightened, sobbing Egyptian woman, Grant rolled the unconscious savage over on his stomach and tied his hands behind his back with the belt he

took from his overalls. Grant dragged the body a little way apart from the others. When he turned back he found the Egyptian woman carefully examining the unconscious oriental girl. Much of the fear and self-pity had gone out of her face. There was something almost maternal in the ravaged beauty of her royal features. Grant left them alone.

Soon Yandra came into the area, followed by the young Roman. Her expression was that of a woman who has thus far been totally successful. Sensually, making an exhibition of the act, Yandra settled to the floor. A few feet away the naked child still sat without motion, staring into space, as if her mind were light-years and centuries from the events around her.

"Wha'tam so mad, li'l flue?" she said to the unanswering child.

"*Pace tua,*" the Roman said, smiling at Grant as he lowered himself to the floor.

Settling a few feet away, Grant pulled a kitchen match from a pocket and struck it against the floor. He puffed a cigarette alight and broke the match under his thumb. Yandra watched his actions in amazement.

"Wha' in Siva's holy name am tha'?" she asked.

"It's a cigarette."

"Oh, da," the girl said brightly, "I 'member. I heared 'bout them. They was used. . . . "

"*Matal heloth?*" a guttural, masculine voice said suddenly, in a tone of arrogance and command.

Grant rose to see a short, stocky, swarthy man dressed in loose blouse and tight slacks of black with gold trimming. The outfit was obviously some type of uniform. On one side of his head sat a large, black tam-o-shanter; on his feet were black, shiny boots; in his hand was a strangely shaped pistol. On his hip he wore a large, ornate black and gold holster, a badge of authority. His face was made of harsh lines, sharp angles, and reminded Grant of Shelley's poem: *And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command. Tell that its sculptor well those passions read.* It was the man's face ever more than the ugly weapon he carried that bothered Grant.

"I don't understand you," Grant said slowly, not particularly surprised. "Do you speak English by any chance?"

The newcomer looked at Grant coldly for a moment. Then his narrow eyes slowly surveyed the others, lingering on Yandra and the unconscious oriental girl.

"*Matal heloth?*" he said again, looking back at Grant.

Grant shook his head and shrugged. "I don't understand you." There was something in the other's speech he found familiar, though the language was none he knew.

"*Parlez-vous francais? Sprechen Sie deutsch?*" Grant tried the two languages other than English he knew without result.

"*Hodame!*" the man said, rubbing his chin, still holding his pistol level. Then he nodded angrily, aimed his weapon at one of the partitions — and fired.

Momentarily Grant was blinded by the intense light. As his vision returned he saw that a small hole had been melted in the upright slab of metal. The fused metal around the gaping wound still glowed red, still smoldered.

"Krath!" the uniformed man said slowly, loudly. "*Hern* Krath," and placed his left thumb against his chest. *"Heloth!"* Then he suddenly pointed his index finger at Grant and leveled his pistol at his stomach. *"Meta?"*

"Grant," he answered slowly, grinding his cigarette butt beneath his heel and looking at the Enfield out of the corner of his eye.

Krath's gaze shifted to Yandra and his index finger leaped toward her. There was an unpleasant smile on his chiseled features, a grotesque sculptor's work.

"Yandragordo'shel," the girl answered slowly, returning his smile with an enigmatic twist of her lips, lifting her eyebrows.

"Yan . . ." Krath pronounced the first syllable and then let his voice trail off. *"Meta?"* he said again, his stubby index finger jumping toward her.

"Yandra," she said slowly, distinctly, almost flauntingly. She shifted her weight to her right leg so that her left hip swung toward him. She was taunting him, daring him, laughing at him.

The dark man's hand went inside his loose blouse and came out holding a thin transparent tube which contained perhaps a dozen tiny white pills. Krath shook one out onto his tongue, never taking his eyes from Yandra's, then slipped the tube back inside his blouse. As he swallowed the pill his face flushed a deep red. For a moment Grant saw white lines on his cheek and neck that were the remains of scars well hidden by surgery. Then the uniformed man coughed. His complexion returned to normal, and he looked away from Yandra.

"Adsum," the Roman soldier answered defiantly, though the paleness of his cheeks betrayed his fear of the small weapon in Krath's hand. "Marcellus Decius Ligarius," he said at last.

During this the young oriental girl who lay in the Egyptian woman's lap had regained consciouness and had slowly become aware of her surroundings. Despite the fear she must have felt she had remained quiet, observant. Now Krath's gaze turned in her direction.

"Memnet," the Egyptian woman answered, her voice cracking with fear.

"Lui," the oriental girl said, her voice faint, husky with conquered hysteria. "Lui," she said again, louder, while Memnet helped her to sit up.

"Mato?" Krath said suddenly, pointing toward the deaf-mute child who sat silently on the warm floor. *"Mato hok?"* He looked at Grant.

"I don't know," Grant said, shrugging.

"Hun amato note," Krath said, pointing toward the paleolithic giant who lay unconscious against a partition. *"Hat?"* he asked Grant.

Grant shook his head wearily and Yandra laughed.

"Quid rides?" Marcellus Decius Ligarius said, his hand resting on the hilt of his short sword.

"Narc yorn a'lorth," the uniformed man said slowly. *"Narc hern. Spra hal un a'harn halc."*

Smiling again a smile that Grant did not like, Krath aimed his weapon and burned another gaping hole into the partition's metal. Then he slipped the weapon into its ornate holster, sat down, and looked from Yandra to Lui and back to Yandra, still smiling.

"Hern heloth," he said softly, and closed his eyes.

"Shape it down, dag," Yandra said, an unfriendly smile on her lovely green face, "you don' bubble so nice."

Grant did not really know what she meant, but felt that he probably agreed with her.

Grant lowered himself into a sitting position beside his rifle, keeping a watchful eye on Krath who was now asleep, or at least pretended to be asleep.

It was real. It was all happening. These people were all what they seemed to be, people from different times, different periods of history. For some unknown reason and by some unknown means they had suddenly all gathered together in this room. Perhaps an explanation would come with time.

The only thing to do was wait and see — and stay alive. Grant reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled pack containing his last cigarette and wondered how long it would be before he had another — if ever.

IV

It was perhaps half an hour after Krath's arrival when the room again became dark. As always, it was sudden, without warning. Memnet shrieked in fear and Yandra cursed. Grant's hand wrapped around the wooden stock of the Enfield, feeling the faint trace of gun oil on the wood beneath his finger tips, and waited, half expecting violence. But there was only the faint sound of breathing in, breathing out, a ragged chorus of life living as always.

When the light returned Grant saw that Marcellus held his deadly gladius in his hand and Krath, his laser pistol. Yandra lay back against the partition with her legs apart, her hands crossed beneath her breasts, her eyes closed as if sleeping. Memnet shook with fear and Lui attempted to comfort her. The naked child had not moved. "Ugh," as Grant had decided to call the paleolithic savage, was straining on the belt that held him, his bearded face livid with rage.

No one moved. Yandra coughed once and shifted in her sleep. Grant watched the primitive man, wondering how far out of the past he had come, eight, ten thousand years, maybe more. *The poor devil,* he thought, *he's probably more frightened than Memnet.*

After a while the anger seemed to seep out of the savage's face, and was gradually replaced by something that in a civilized man might have been pleading. He looked at Grant with large, liquid eyes and made gestures with his head.

"What is it?" Grant said, rising and crossing to where he lay. The eyes of the others followed him. "You want loose, don't you?" Grant said aloud, standing above the huge, hairy, naked figure. Hell, he thought, he can't be any worse than Krath.

As Grant bent to release the belt that held the savage's hands behind his back, Yandra, fully awake, cried *"Nyet*, Siva!" and Krath bellowed. But the paleolithic man was free. He stood slowly and rubbed his wrists. There was an odd, almost gentle expression on his rough features, and he smiled at Grant.

"Any time," Grant said.

As if timed with his words, at that moment a portion of the floor in the center of the partitioned area opened. From below rose a large metal platter heaped with fruit, vegetables and meat.

For a few long moments no one moved. Eyes looked hungrily at the food, but each seemed hesitant to act, fearful that the others, in that atmosphere of tension, might misinterpret his action.

At last Yandra, knowing she had the least to fear, moved forward and filled her hands with food. Then, one by one, the women first, each took from the platter and went off alone to eat. Only the naked child seemed uninterested, though the women tried to feed her.

Later, after all had eaten, the platter lowered back into the floor. The metal closed above it, leaving it again solid, seamless.

"Davidgrant," Yandra said, sensually stretching her arms, "wha' do you thin' this place am?"

"I don't know," he answered slowly, letting his eyes look directly into hers. "I just don't know."

Krath stood up suddenly and looked at the two uneasily. A dark expression flickered across his stone features, as if he had just realized that there were two among the group who could communicate, and one of them was Yandra. He settled back and sat watching them thoughtfully through half closed eyes.

"Why would anyone wan' we here? Who'm th' other half o' th' bubble?" she asked, gesticulating with her hands. Then, not giving Grant a chance to answer, she said, "Do you thin' I'm real?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, looking at the lovely naked girl who did not seem to mind his stare.

"I don' know whether you'm real or na', figure I," she said. "Mayb' you'm. I don' know whether Marcellus am real or na. Mayb' he'm. Yous both am like peops in history tapes, you know. Like Marcellous am ou' of ancien' Rome an' you'm from ancien' North 'Mercia. It'm like a costume party, like you sayed, bu' na really. It bubble! You'm too real — figure I, you abs'lute ac' like somebody from ancien' North 'Mercia an' Mercellus abs'lute ac' like somebody from Rome. Figure I, you even talk ol' fashioned kind of Ange an' smoke cigarettes an' wear too much clothes an' you jus' don' bubble like modern peops. An' Marcellus talk like somethin' I don' understand bu' you say am Latin — an' I never met anybody who speaked Latin before.

To hang, dag! Am it all real? Do it bubble?"

"Real?" Grant answered. "Hell, I don't know. It seems real." He paused. "What about Krath? Ever heard of anyone like him in your history?"

"Krath," Yandra sneered, "he don' bubble, dag. Nyet, I never seed anythin' like he, 'cep mayb' th' Nazis an' th' Commissars. Bu' he na one of they."

"That's what I figured."

"Wha' year you from?" Yandra asked suddenly.

"1965."

"A.D.?" Yandra asked, waiting for Grant's nod, then sat looking at the ceiling for a moment, her attractive face twisted in deep thought. "I guess mayb' tha' was two, three hundred years before th'Empire."

"Five hundred years before your time?"

"Grab," the girl said in a tone that indicated agreement.

Grant sat looking at her for a moment. "Things must have changed a lot," he said.

"Gram," the girl repeated. " 'Tam nothin' like yous time. We has thin's yous peops never dreamed 'bou'. Like Para-Vraches an' 3V an' Zavods an' Li'l Alps an' Neoatvos. An' we's world'm at peace, an' there was no peace in yous time. Under th'Empire there am never war. All peops am happy an' bubbles an' am at peace an' th' Tholeh watches over we all an' sees tha' we has everythin' we need. We'm very happy peops, dag."

"I sort of gathered that."

"Ho," the girl laughed, "le' I talk you, dag! We know, Th' Code of Siva was th' answer to th' world's problems, an' th' grea' Tholek, Grabok, I brough' it to th' world. Wi' th'Empire an' th' Code of Siva, we amna bother wi' any ol' fashion morals or principles or anythin' like yous peops. We'm at las' free!

"Figure I, dag, we'm born to be happy, to bubble, flash, dag. Siva sayed: 'Mans was made for pleasure. na pleasure for mans.' Soo we flash dag. "

Grant looked at her for a long while, the meaning behind some of her speech coming to him. It was vague, but it was a glimpse of the world which had produced her — *"Oh brave new world,"* he thought, and wondered how far Huxley had missed the mark. *Not far*, he answered. *Not far at all.*

V

So it began, something that became, over a period of five days by Grant's watch, almost a routine. It was almost an accepted, though meaningless and enigmatic, way of life.

No reason was given for their captivity within the featureless metal room, though each had his theories. Each accepted the presence of the others as aliens from worlds different from his own as the endless red deserts of Mars would have been. Only the unknown and unknowable child was different. She seemed unaware of the others. She never ate nor slept nor moved; her life was betrayed only by the occasional fluttering of her eyelids and the steady,

rhythmic rising and falling of her chest as she breathed. Except for these things she might have been a statue of stone too pale to be living flesh — except for these things, and the strange aura of power Grant felt when his hands touched her shoulders.

During the five days, during the nearly one hundred and twenty hours that followed Grant's arrival in the room, darkness came and went forty-three times. It came suddenly without warning, at random times and lasting for random periods.

Perhaps not quite random, Grant sometimes found himself thinking. The darkness came at such awkward moments that it would seem planned, a joke played by an idiot at a light switch with nothing better to do than torment the inmates of the strange metallic room.

The food tray was different. It rose from the floor every five hours and twenty-eight minutes with clockwork regularity.

But each time there was a little less food and what there was of it a little less desirable. Upon the arrival of the platter, each person would select a portion he felt to be his share. Uusually no one would complain, but a simple look, a glance, a muted rumbling in the throat would generally be enough to make a person put back what the others felt to be more than his share. Usually, but not always.

During the first five days there had been no violence. Tempers had flared, but not to the point of actual conflict, though Grant knew that they were not far from the time when there would not be enough food to go around. Then actual hunger would rise — and then the trouble would start.

Their captors had the kindness to provide them with an open latrine in a small space shielded by three partitions. Running water and an aromatic scent in the air kept the area almost pleasant. Drinking water was provided by a fountain, actually a bowl of running water set in the floor. Grant found the sanitary provisions at least acceptable, if not plush.

The problem was people.

Grant and Yandra had little to do with each other. After a few searching conversations they found that, though the language they spoke was nearly the same, their worlds were as alien to each other as either was to Memnet's ancient kingdom of Upper and Lower Egypt.

To Yandra, Grant's United States was a barbaric, provincial and perhaps just slightly romantic historical fact. She had read about it, heard about it, seen films and tapes about it. She had been told it had been one of the hard dying vestiges of a way of life, a philosophy and a dream that had passed out of actual being nearly five centuries before her birth, and whose only modern value was as a setting for stories and un-morality plays.

His Atlanta was a grubby, primitive collection of unhealthy buildings, of rigid enforcement of nonsensical rules and regulations, a place where no "healthy" human be-

ing could possibly survive. His profession, consulting electrical engineer, was something that could and should better be done by a computer, and leave a human being free to follow "human" pursuits. His clothing was perhaps the most ridiculous thing about him. A *clothing fetish* she could understand in Memnet or Lui or even Krath: they were barbarians who spoke barbarous tongues. But Grant spoke Ange, the language of civilized man, though with an ancient accent and ridiculous grammar.

But the most unbearable thing Yandra found in the creature who called himself David Grant — two words: *David,* then *Grant* — was his unbelievably narrow moral code. Such a creature was hardly worth worrying about! Now, Marcellus, there was a different matter . . .

From Yandra Grant gained a glimpse of the future his own age was producing. It was a world torn by ideological disputes; a world whose beliefs were crumbling and no new beliefs were rising to take their place. In it, expediency was a way of life, and principle was at best a noble idea to be given lip service, but never acted upon or allowed to be a hindrance to actual living.

In short, the world which followed his own would be a world which was quickly cutting its own throat. And then, like a Napoleon becoming emperor in a nation of Jacobins, a creature calling himself the Tholeh and preaching a gospel of sensual excitement called the Code of Siva, a westernized rehash of three thousand year old Hindu garbage, came to unite the world in an empire. The Empire. Th'Empire — a dictatorship based on the degradation of its subjects. It remained in power by pandering to the vilest whims of the mobs, creating circuses that would have made Rome's most degenerate days seem mildly Victorian, as it tottered on the brink of total destruction, more complete, more final than anything twentieth century wars could have produced while its owners and slaves played sensual games.

Krath was the inevitable consequence of such a society — sooner a later a *real* dictator and his gang would step in Cromwell-wise and crush the sensual fairyland of Yandra's age.

One had, and went on to build with all the knowledge and science of his advanced period an Orwellian society as vile as any history had ever imagined, a dictatorship so powerful, so absolute, so complete that mankind, in all future generations, might never free himself again. The future of Man as seen in Yandra, the child of his own age, and in Krath, who must be the child of hers, was bleak indeed to David Grant.

Yandra and Marcellus, their initial "shyness" over, now openly admired each other. They tried to communicate by devising sign language and attempting to learn words in the other's tongue. Thus far there had been no physical contact between them, at least so far as Grant knew, but it obviously was

not far away. Another day or two and an affair would blossom between the two, an affair whose physical expression could not be hidden in that room — and whose consequences might be death.

Grant tried to warn Yandra that Krath would not stand for her and Marcellus being lovers. She laughed and spoke an ancient obscenity. Otherwise it had no effect on her behavior; unless, as Grant suspected, she flaunted and teased Krath a little more, whetted his appetite for a meal she had no intention of serving a short, ugly man like him. She teased Krath, swung her hips so that the beads danced across her buttocks, flipped the necklaces between her lovely breasts, smiled and lowered her eyelids — and sat down near Marcellus.

Krath himself, calm, quiet most of the time, as if still sizing up the situation, never let the others forget that he was better armed than any of them. He could kill them all at any whim. He allowed his interest to shift from Yandra, naked, obvious, lovely Yandra, to quiet, hidden, mysterious and beautiful Lui, his rock-ugly features just showing what he felt.

It won't be long, Grant thought, *before Krath decides to touch.*

If he went after Yandra, Marcellus would object with the drawn and deadly, glittering splinter of iron that was the famous Roman short sword, the gladius. And if he went after Lui, who obviously feared him, Grant would be forced to protect her. There was sure to be a fight — sure to be death.

Lui and Memnet were become very close despite the great cultural and language barriers between them. The relationship between the young Chinese girl and the middle aged Egyptian noblewoman seemed to be almost that of mother and daughter. Lui's young mind accepted the unknowable as being so — if not making sense, at least as existing and requiring acceptance. And soon she was soothing the older Memnet, helping her to accept this strange and terrible place in which she found herself — a place she must believe to be the Underworld, although it was an after-life the Book of the Dead had never prepared her for.

The paleolithic Ugh, a gigantic savage from the old stone age, seemed somehow to have adapted to his inexplicable surroundings, thanking his animistic gods that he was still alive. Perhaps he found the metallic room no harder to comprehend than his native forest. He was friendly toward Grant since his release; he ignored Marcellus as unworthy of his attention; and showed open dislike toward Krath, whom he seemed to regard as an enemy who required only a very slight excuse for killing. Thus far Krath had not provided that excuse. Of the women, he showed interest only in Yandra. The other two, covered as they were by clothing, might not have been women to him. He regarded them as he did Marcellus, as being, but having no great importance.

Ugh, not a social creature by nature, spent most of his time outside

the partitioned area, wandering around the room and enjoying what little freedom that provided, looking at the walls and ceiling. At times yelling, at times banging his fists on the floor and chanting, at times quiet and contemplative.

As for Grant himself, after an initial phase of attempting to determine more of his new environment, and some means of returning home, he began to divide his time between sleeping, thinking and exploring the room.

Early in their stay he persuaded Krath to direct the beam of his pistol against the wall. The metal began to melt under the tremendous heat generated by the weapon — but was far too thick for any possibility of cutting their way out of the room before the weapon expended its charge. Krath had finally shrugged and turned away disdainfully, returning the pistol to the ornate holster on his hip. His attitude was I-told-you-so. Sometime later Grant had Marcellus and Ugh assist him in reaching the ceiling. Standing on their shoulders, Grant was able to touch it and found it solid metal like the wall and floor, though quilted-looking and emitting light as though translucent. While touching the odd metal Grant had the uneasy sensation that someone was looking back at him through it.

These and other attempts to learn the nature of their prison, its purpose and who their captors were proved fruitless. A despondent lethargy settled over Grant. Even this limited cooperation between the fellow captives dissolved, and each retreated into a private world, sitting and waiting for he did not know what.

Remembering Poe's *Pit and the Pendulum,* Grant marked a spot on the floor with a large scratch, and forgot about it for nearly twenty-four hours. Upon returning to that spot, Grant found the mark almost gone.

Perhaps an inch of the foot long scratch remained, and this where the wall and ceiling met, not where Grant had made the mark five feet from the wall. Quickly pacing his way across the room, Grant discovered that the room *was* shrinking. The walls had come in nearly ten feet in the course of twenty-four hours. Ten feet a day, Grant thought. And if the room is now 100 feet wide — that left ten days. . . .

The next "day" his observations confirmed it. The room was shrinking at a steady rate. At the end of five days fifty feet had come off its diameter. In nine more days they would be crushed between the walls; that is, if they did not kill each other off over the dwindling food supply, over the women, or for no good reason at all before that time.

It's building, Grant thought. *The tension's rising and it's going to pop. The Captors — whoever or whatever they are, damn them! — are watching this spectacle. Maybe that's why we're here to provide the blood that's soon going to be spilt. It isn't going to take much to set it off.*

Grant was standing in the middle of some kind of insane death

trap, and he did not know why. He checked his Enfield and found that he had three rounds left. Then he waited.

VI

Grant was outside the partitions when one of the unpredictable periods of darkness hit. Settling to the floor, he became as comfortable as he could and waited for the darkness to end.

Forty-eight and a half minutes later, as suddenly and meaninglessly as it had left, light returned to the shrinking room. Rising and picking up his rifle, Grant started back toward the partitioned area. He had taken no more than two or three steps when he saw them. Yandra and Marcellus. They did not see him. They were much too occupied with other things to pay attention.

He felt embarrassed and guilty of barging into something that was none of his business. Likely Yandra would not have minded if he stood by and watched and even made comments — in her world she was used to that sort of thing. Grant turned away, and as he did he saw Krath come out of the partitions, his pistol in hand.

"Yandra!" Krath yelled in his guttural accent, standing just beyond the last partition, his eyes hot burning coals in the gray stone of his face. *"Ralk hotteb,* Yandra!"

Neither the green girl nor her lover heard.

Krath's ugly face flushed insane anger that twisted his stone features into a demented theatre mask. His lips pulled tight across his teeth and curled back like a carnivorous animal; the cords of his neck stood out stark and tight behind the open collar of his night-black blouse. Yet the hand that held the raised laser pistol was cold and calm.

"Krath! Don't!" Grant yelled — and as he yelled the barrel of the pistol glowed for a moment, only a bare fraction of a moment. That was all.

Coherent light, coherent heat, an intense beam of organized and methodical radiation, cut through the air. It caught Marcellus in the flesh of his side, cut through his intestines, burnt through his body. He convulsed, clutching his charred side with one hand and with the other reaching out automatically for the deadly short sword. *"Coneres . . .* " he gasped as Krath's pistol fired again.

The second burst found the young centurion's naked chest as he tried to rise. The Roman tried to scream, but was unable; there were no lungs to provide the air. Yandra screamed for him, covering her face in horror. Krath's third bolt struck the dying man's face, bursting his eyes. Krath laughed.

David Grant was an excellent shot with a rifle. He had several medals to prove it, and it was seldom that he missed at such close range — but this time he did miss. Perhaps it was rage and horror at seeing Krath murder Marcellus that made his hands waver. He fired off one shot and that shot went high.

Krath spun in Grant's direction, ignoring a screaming, roaring Ugh

who came out of the partitions, and aimed the laser weapon.

Grant jerked back the bolt of his rifle, throwing out the empty casing and shoving another shell into the chamber — all this as he threw himself toward the floor, and Krath took aim and fired again.

There was no time for Grant to pull off another shot before the beam of heat tore into his shoulder. Heat and pain more intense than anything he had ever imagined shot through his body. Grant saw Krath turn and burn Ugh's legs out from under him.

Then merciful darkness ended the world for David Grant.

It hung in space, a world, a planet. It hung in space as if by marionette strings and followed an ageless path around its parent sun.

It hung against strange stars and unfamiliar constellations. It was a world with a moon much like that of Earth, a moon more distant and not quite so pockmarked. A moon like Earth's; a world much like Earth — yet not — Or was it not?

Or was it the Earth of another era? Of another era so remote that the stars themselves had not yet moved to become Ursa Major and Scorpio and the Southern Cross? Of another era so remote in ageless past that the continents of ancient had another shape and were not yet Europe and Asia and Africa and the Americas and Antarctica? Was it an Earth, the Earth, of a billion years ago? Or perhaps a billion years hence? Maybe, yes, maybe it was Earth . . . maybe . . . maybe . . . .

The Dream was one of TIME.

A people lived on this Earth-world of the long, long stone-forgotten past, a people lived. A dark, shiny-furred people, not people like men, but people.

— and the pain, God, the pain! The pain almost brought the thing who called himself David Grant out of the Dream. Almost, but not quite —

Look! said the Dream, look upward, skyward, sunward. See that Sun? See the Earth-world sun skyward? Imagine, said the Dream, imagine just ten per cent more heat and light and radiation. Imagine what a mere ten per cent would do to Earth and the shiny-furred people who dwelt thereon. Imagine, said the Dream.

And the Dream was one of TIME.

— oh, the pain, cried David Grant —

Said the Dream, out there skyward, beyond the atmosphere, are worlds which are not Earth-worlds. Look, said the Dream, this world is too small and dry. Even now it is dead. And look, said the Dream, this one is too hot and damp. And this one had no atmosphere. And this one is too cold. And this one . . . . And this one. . . .

The sky-worlds are not for the shiny-furred people, said the Dream.

And the stars, they can never, never reach the stars.

The Dream was one of TIME. Time.

The shiny-furred people looked futureward and said they would build a way to go past the 10 per cent increase of the sun.

The sun grew, oh, hot, said the Dream. It scorched dry the Earth-world, dry and empty of life, stone dry and bare and dead. But into the river-stream of TIME went canoes, canoes of TIME eight thousand years long, each a NOW, an extension of NOW eight thousand years long, moving through the river-stream of Time with the motionless swiftness of any NOW.

And inside the eight-thousand-year-long canoes sleep/slid the shiny furred people, sleep/sliding for a turning of the galaxy; sleep/-sliding past one, then another, ten, twelve turns of the starry pinwheel, sleep sliding silently as death, as the eight-thousand-year-long NOW flows with the current river-stream, TIME.

— oh, God, the pain, cried David Grant —

VII

The re-creation of the universe began with a hard, bright spot of glowing pain. It sat just behind the place where the thing called David Grant dwelt within a cavern of bone. Then life returned.

The creature that had been a man and had become something less was again a man. Grant felt pain and knew that he was still alive. There was a place of intense pain along the back of his left shoulder, touching at his side and ending with his left buttock — a scorching, bubbling pain that stopped just short of consciousness. But it stopped, and allowed the thing who called himself David Grant to exist again.

David Grant opened his eyes.

The room within which he lay might have been a hospital operating room. He lay on his back, his weight falling upon the spots of agony that ran down his back and looked upward toward a cluster of glowing spheres, and three faces that were not the faces of men.

He had met the Captors.

For a long moment Grant lay motionless, looking into the faces that could not have been real. They were strangely, horribly beautiful faces.

Then he laughed aloud and raised himself on his right elbow.

One of the alien beings lifted a hand, terribly swiftly. In it was something Grant knew to be a weapon.

"Go on. Use it," Grant dared.

The creature stopped and stood perfectly still, more still than a man could possibly have stood, and held the weapon aimed toward Grant's face.

Tall they were. The tallest of the three was at least seven feet. They were humanoid, and male; beautiful and graceful in the manner of an aquatic mammal, a sea otter or perhaps a dolphin. Their heads were shaped more in the fashion of a seal than a man, though their eyes glowed with the conscious intelligence of a human. They had no external ears, only tiny depressions behind the temples to show where they were. Their noses were practically non-existent, but the dark, thin-lipped mouth was mobile and sensitive. The Captor's heads

rested on thick necks, joining powerful shoulders. The arms were manlike in shape, though shorter in proportion to their bodies than a man's, and ended in five-digited hands, astonishingly humanoid except for the thin, vestigial membranes between the fingers. Their chests were broad enough to house lungs twice the size of Grant's though their waists were as thin as Yandra's.

Each wore a loin cloth, a weapon belt, short boots and a band of brightly colored material around his head, a band that glittered and shimmered when he moved. The face of each was marked with white lines through the short fur of his cheeks and forehead, lines that drew stars and diamonds and swirls. They brought to Grant's mind a picture of Apache braves surveying a valley from the crest of a ridge. There was that same pride, arrogance, and honor in the dark eyes of the creatures who stood looking down on him.

A Captor spoke in a high-pitched and twittering voice. Its large canine teeth sparkled in the light of the globes.

The largest of the three stepped forward and slammed the palm of his hand into Grant's face, knocking him backward onto the table, down on his painfully burnt shoulder.

Involuntarily Grant gasped in agony. As he fell he threw out his arm, smashing his fist against the extended forearm of his attacker. The other jumped back, hissing like a cat, and waited.

Despite the pain of his shoulder, Grant threw himself off the table, landing on the floor on both feet, his right fist coming up toward the alien's abdomen above the weapons belt. The creature bounced backward, bringing up his guard against Grant's stomach blow, but was caught unaware by Grant's heavy hunting boot slamming against his naked shin. The Captor stumbled backward, white canine teeth showing below tight lips, and Grant kicked again toward the creature's bright loin cloth, knowing now fair play had no rules. wondering if it would do as much damage as a similar kick would do to a man.

It did. The nearly seven foot, shiny-furred creature crumpled in pain, letting out a high-pitched yell of agony.

Grant spun toward the nearest of the others, their leader, and saw a look that in the eyes of a man would have been approval, and at the same time heard a strange subsonic rumbling and . . . .

VIII

Awoke in darkness. lying against a warm metal wall.

Somewhere a woman screamed.

Slowly Grant rose to his feet. For a few long moments he could only lean against the wall in the darkness, his stomach writhing within him, his burns like living flames along his shoulder, side and buttocks. Then his body was his again and he stood erect.

"God damn you," he whispered through swollen lips, and then was silent and listened.

"Krath!" a woman's voice

screamed from the darkness. It was followed by a long string of obscenities.

Deep and booming, the voice of Krath yelled something back at her. There was the dull thud of metal smashing against flesh, a moan and the sound of a body collapsing upon itself. Another woman screamed—*Lui,* Grant thought—then the smacking sound of an open palm against a cheek. Lui screamed again and Grant thought he could hear Krath's voice, low and monotonous, cursing. Two more slaps came, hard, sudden, and Lui's screaming became no more than a steady sob. Krath laughed.

For the briefest of instants Grant had wanted to run to the partitions and try to tell the others what had happened to him, to tell them that he had met their Captors, and that now they had a common enemy against which to fight. But only for an instant. Then he remembered that Krath, the stone faced Gestapo from a world beyond the future, Krath had tried to kill him and he had been saved by his alien Captors. Krath had murdered Marcellus and probably Ugh and had just now struck Yandra a blow that might have killed her, and was at that moment beating Lui—and Memnet was silent in the darkness, what of her? Grant forgot the common alien enemy. Krath would not let him live long enough to try to explain to him what he had seen.

Krath or Grant—one of the two was about to die.

Grant stood for a few moments, gathering what strength he had left, estimating position and distance in the darkness. There was no problem in locating the direction of the sounds. The distance could not be great, perhaps thirty feet.

He thought no more—he moved.

Dropping to his knees, Grant moved forward as quickly as his burning shoulder would allow. When his outstretched fingers found the first partition, he knew he was scarcely inches from Lui's sobbing, Krath's heavy breathing. He began to feel his way in among the metal partitions.

His hand touched flesh. For a moment his heart almost failed him. He waited; there was no reaction. He ran his hand up a motionless leg to a naked female thigh, found a thin metallic belt and strings of dangling beads around a woman's waist. There was a warm wetness on the back of her head that smelled like blood. Quickly placing his hand on her throat, just under the chin, Grant found a steady pulse. Krath had not killed her—yet.

Then he listened again for Krath's heavy breathing, located it, and slowly, noiselessly rose to his feet.

And the room became filled with light!

Krath yelled. With one motion the half-naked killer spun and snatched the laser pistol from the holster at his side.

Grant leaped away, smashing against a partition as Krath swung up his weapon and fired. A beam of heat and light passed Grant's right hip, scorching his clothing, blistering his skin. The sickening odor of

burnt cloth and flesh in his nostrils, Grant leaped. His fists smashed at Krath's face, his knees searching for the soft parts of his stomach. The laser pistol hissed again; but its beam of heat ended against a nearby partition, showering the area with sparks and bits of molten metal.

Krath rolled savagely, throwing Grant from him and breaking free. A booted foot smashed into Grant's mouth and knocked him back into the partition on his injured shoulder. Krath was coming to his feet, his pistol rising toward Grant's face—when Lui came into the fight.

Naked, beaten, one eye discolored and swollen shut, her fragile oriental beauty twisted by pain and hatred, Lui was leaping toward the pistol, throwing her body against the barrel as Krath squeezed the firing stud, clawing at Krath's eyes.

A smell of burning flesh filled the air. A strangled moan came from Lui's lips and she fell backward, her breast charred and ugly.

Grant came leaping up, his shoulder smashing Krath backward and to the floor, knocking the pistol from his hand. His fingers closed around the killer's throat and tightened. Krath's eyes swelled as if they were going to burst and his face became a strange purplish-black it could never have become in life.

Yandra's scream brought Grant back to reality.

Slowly Grant pulled his fingers away from Krath's throat and rose. Yandra, blood drying in a red-brown cake in the green of her hair, was kneeling beside the grotesque form that had been Lui, who lay dying. Behind them sat the deaf-mute child, skin the color of fresh cream, her green-brown eyes gazing into space.

"Oh, holy Siva! Oh, N'Vishna," Yandra whispered, her voice frightened, helpless, alone. Death had suddenly become a reality to Yandra, not just part of a play from which the actors arose when the curtains closed.

"What happened?" Grant asked, kneeling beside the dying girl.

Yandra looked up at him for a few moments, seemingly not understanding his question.

"What happened after he shot me?" Grant asked.

"Oh," the girl said suddenly, a shiver going through her body, "tha', Siva, help I! He killed th' one you called Ugh, burned his legs an' then . . . then he died. Like Marcellus. An' then Krath goed to kill you, figure I, bu' th' lights goed ou' an' when they comed back you an' th' cavedag an' Marcellus was gone. There wasna anythin' lef' bu' bloody spots where yous was. An' then—" Her eyes grew wide and her stomach heaved within her—"then Krath killed Memnet when he raped Lui an' she tried to stop he. He burned one of she's arms off an' then shooted she in th' face an' he beated I an' Lui when we tried to stop he—an' then he, he tied we up wi' strips of Lui's clothes." Her voice came to a sudden stop and she broke into ragged sobs. "Lui!" she cried, then became calm. "He keeped all then food an' wouldna give we any—an' doed what he wanted with we. Siva, 'tamna bubble!"

The oriental girl lay on her back, her breath coming more and more raggedly, more and more slowly, until they could not tell whether she still struggled for life.

"How long was it?" Grant asked.

"How long? Siva, I don't know. A day, two, three days, mayb', forever. I don't know."

"What about her?" he asked, pointing toward the silent child.

"Nothen," Yandra answered, not taking her eyes from Lui. "He doedna bother she, dag. It was like he doedna ev'n know she exist." Then she suddenly looked up at Grant. "Where was you?"

"I don't know," Grant said, feeling pain and fatigue sweep over him. He slowly lowered himself to the floor. "I don't know," he said again, "but I met the ones behind all this. They aren't human, but there's a reason. There's a reason why they're doing this to us, but I don't know what it is—and God help me if I ever get my hands . . ."

At that moment darkness came over the shrinking room and Yandra screamed.

"David!" she cried, then her voice broke into the wild screaming sobs of uncontrollable hysteria.

"Yandra," Grant answered, throwing his arms out in the darkness, grabbing her by her shaking shoulders.

"Lui, she'm gone!"

With the return of light, no more than ten minutes later, Grant saw that the girl's body had vanished. The only sign of her that remained was a spot of blood that had already begun to dry. Krath's body too had vanished in the darkness, leaving them alone in the shrinking metal chamber: Grant, Yandra and the nameless child.

Some feet away Grant found the ruins of his rifle. Nearby was the laser pistol where Krath's dying fingers had dropped it. Grant slipped the weapon into a pocket, then carefully lowered himself to the floor to rest, leaning his weight on his right side. Yandra watched him.

"How bad am you pained?"

"I don't know. I'm alive."

"Let I look," Yandra said, coming to his side.

"No, don't bother. How long has it been since food came?"

"A long time."

"Longer than usual?"

"Da, much longer."

"I wonder if they've decided to stop feeding us."

"Who am they, David?"

"I really don't know," Grant said slowly. "I'm not sure."

As he spoke he felt a gentle downward tugging on his right shoulder, and turned his head to see the partition against which he leaned slowly sinking into the floor, sliding noiselessly into the warm metal of the floor.

Struggling wearily to his feet, Grant became fully aware of three things that were taking place in the room, three things altering their environment. The first was the gradual disappearance of all partitions, their sinking and vanishing into the floor, leaving the room one single, empty expanse. The disappearance of the partitions revealed

the second, and more frightening change—the room was visibly shrinking.

"Wha th' bubble am goen on?" Yandra cried as she became aware of the movement of the wall, automatically reaching for Grant. Her arms around his tired shoulders, Yandra watched the wall, watched it inch in, watched it shrink like a leaking balloon, and her green-lipped mouth opened as if she were going to speak. She stood that way for a long time, staring, her mouth, open her arms half way around Grant's shoulders—then she closed her mouth, and slowly turned her face toward his.

Grant felt sweat forming on his forehead and upper lip. Despite her near nudity, perspiration was already dripping from Yandra's cheeks.

The temperature was rising in the shrinking room.

"I guess we'd better pick her up," Grant said, indicating the child sitting on the bloor. "It'll burn her if it gets much hotter."

"Why bother?" Yandra asked, wiping beads of sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. "She don' feel a thin'."

"Are you sure?"

Yandra did not answer as Grant lifted the child in his arms, but the expression she wore was apology, a realization of the existence of others. It was an experience new to Yandra.

"She's heavy," Grant said. The child weighed much more than he had expected, as if she actually were a statue.

"Dag, 'tam funny she'm still 'live," Yandra said, looking at the blank-eyed child. "Marcellus an' Lui an' Krath an' Memnet an' Ugh am all dead, an' tha' li'l flue am still 'live. To hang, dag, it don' make!"

"Yeah, funny," Grant said.

Then the pain started.

It began at the floor, something that moved slowly up his feet and into his legs like water slowly rising, something that brought with it searing, flesh-eating pain. Some invisible horror had begun, some horror he could not see or hear, but could only feel as a slowly rising tide of pain.

"Davidgrant!" Yandra cried, "I's legs! Somethin' . . ."

"I feel it."

"Wha'tam it? It hurt!"

"I don't know," Grant said angrily. Looking up at the glowing ceiling, he cried: "Why are you doing this? God damn you, why?"

"I'm scared!" Yandra cried, almost screaming. "It'm up to I's waist."

The same agony moved up through Grant's legs, seeping into his knees and hanging there like liquid flame, flowing upward through his nervous system, moving up into his thighs, his hips, into his groin like beams of heat lancing through the tender parts of his body, climbing into his stomach, all while the weight of the child in his arms grew heavier and heavier, as if she added pounds with each passing second. The heat rose and sweat dripped from his cheeks. His mouth grew dryer and dryer. The single circular wall grew smaller.

"Hold her just a minute," Grant said suddenly, handing the child to Yandra.

While he still had the strength he unzipped his coveralls and carefully pulled the damp cloth away from the burns on his side and back. Then he was slipping his shoes back on and standing naked, holding the laser pistol in his hand. "I'll take her back now," he said, reaching for the child. He had the impression that Yandra would have laughed at him if she had had the strength.

"My clothing fetish has its limits," he said.

"'Tam here now," Yandra said a few moments later, her hands going to her breasts. Her face had become pale beneath the fading green tint.

"It's bad," said Grant. The substance of pure pain was seeping into the joints of his shoulders and beginning to run down his arms toward the hands that held the silent, naked child. He wondered if he could hold her when the pain reached those hands.

"Who'm does this, David?" Yandra cried. "Why?"

"They're not human beings," he slowly answered her, "and I don't know why. I can guess. I think it's some kind of a test but I don't . . ."

"David!" Yandra cried as she took a step backward. There was relief and astonishment on her face. "'Tam gone! Th' pain am gone!"

"No," Grant answered, his elbows bursting into flaming pain.

Yandra took another step and her face showed that the pain had returned. She jumped back to her original spot, like a chess piece in some complicated, unorthodox move.

"This spot am clear!" she cried, laughing, carefully mapping out the tiny spot on the floor where the pain did not exist. "Here 'tam safe, dag. Here it don't hurt!"

"It's not big enough for us both," Grant said. It was almost impossible to talk as the pain climbed up his neck and flamed into the muscles and bones of his jaw. The child in his arms, the hot metal of Krath's pistol in his hand had become enormous weights he could hold but little longer.

"Come, Davidgrant," Yandra cried, her features drawn in the expression of unfamiliar emotions she felt within her, "please!"

Grant said through clenched teeth, "I can't, Yandra. Look for yourself; there isn't enough room for us both."

"Please, David!" she cried, her pale face mirroring Grant's agony. "I'll make space for you."

"Y-yandra," Grant gasped, almost staggering under the increasing burden of weight and pain, "if I tried to stand beside you there we'd both be subjected to it. We—we'd start fighting for the clear space." Then he stopped, his mind reeling with pain and heat and the weight that was almost too much to bear. "T-that's what they want!" he cried. "That's what they want—they want us to fight it out like animals!"

Grant turned his eyes toward the ceiling and cried:

"No, God damn you, I won't do it!" He extended the child toward Yandra. "Take her," he gasped.

"Wha'tam it, David?" Yandra asked as she accepted the limp child. She grimaced as her hand touched Grant's and she felt the pain that tore through his body.

"They . . . want . . . us . . . to . . . kill . . . each . . . other!" he forced the words out. "Won't do!"

"Why?"

"Don't know!" Wavering, Grant raised the pistol and aimed it toward the ceiling. "Won't do it! Damn."

He depressed the firing stud on the weapon's handle and a tongue of heat and light slapped against the quilted metal above him.

When the pain reached his eyes, he went blind. When the pain reached his ears he went deaf. When the pain reached his soul, he died. Then there was nothing.

IX

When consciousness returned to David Grant he was in a different room.

Its walls were of polished wood and decorated in an alien fashion with bits of metal and brightly colored cloth in patterns strange to human eyes. It was a large room, one end of which was a curtain of glowing yellow-green radiance that climbed from floor to ceiling and swept from wall to wall, a living, moving field of energy. In the center of the field, glowing with a light of its own, a sword suspended in the air.

Its blade was upward, hilt downward.

It was something like a broadsword of the Middle Ages and something like no weapon ever made by Man, richly carved and decorated, and stained with ancient blood. Beyond the golden wall was another room in which stood a naked being whose body was covered with navy blue fur and whose angry non-human eyes glowed with the reflected light of the field of energy.

Grant slowly came to his feet. He did not take his eyes from the creature beyond the field, seeing Yandra and the deaf-mute child out of the corner of his eye.

"They let us live," he said slowly.

He was truly alive. The burns and cuts that had covered his body were healed. The five-day growth of beard that had covered his face and the filth that had covered his body were also gone.

"Wha' do they wan' now?" Yandra asked, her voice frightened.

"I think I understand, Yandra."

"Wha', Davidgrant?" Yandra said. "Why has they doed this to we?"

"They're from a long, long way off, Yandra," he said slowly. He knelt on the soft, warm furriness of the floor beside her, remembering a dream that had not really been a dream at all. "Not in space, but in time; from the past so fantastically distant that we aren't even sure the Earth even existed then. Some terrible solar catastrophe occurred in their time that obliterated all trace of their existence from the face of the Earth, cleaned and sterilized Earth so that life had to start all over again. They knew it was going to happen. And since there was nowhere else to go—they built some

kind of time machines, or time ships, or something, and came into the future."

Yandra shook her head, not understanding. "Why had they tortured we?"

"Not for the fun of it," Grant said. "I don't think they've enjoyed it. But they didn't mind it either. They had what they thought were good reasons.

"I think that when they had gone as far as they could, maybe even further than they had intended into the future, they found that Earth was again inhabited by intelligent beings. By Man. Now they're sitting outside of Time. This whole place we're in doesn't exist in any one specific spot of Time, but along a continuous *Now* that comes in contact with Time along an eight thousand year long front. You could go out one door and be in Ugh's time, and out another and be in yours. They're all simultaneous as far as this *Now* is concerned. Like a ship sailing beside a shore. You could climb off the ship and touch the shore at a number of points—while at the same time the ship is slowly sailing past that shore."

Yandra nodded in at least half understanding. "Bu' why has they kidnapp' we? Do they wan' to take th' Earth from we?"

"Something like that," Grant said. "They're looking for some place to call home. But they won't just take it from us. I think they're honorable people, in their own way."

"Honorable!" Yandra cried.

"Yes," Grant interrupted, looking at the creature whose intelligent eyes looked back through the force screen at him. "Not long ago I hated them, and maybe I still do. But now I think I understand them a little. I can respect them, even if I don't like them. They're honorable, a savage can be honorable in the terms of his society. Only their terms aren't ours. I think they're carnivores, meat eaters like lions and wolves. We aren't; we're omnivorous. We aren't totally dependent on living meat. And that has a great effect on the way we live, the way we think, the way our civilizations are put together. They're civilized creatures, but by their standards, not ours."

"Bu' they hurted we!" Yandra cried.

"Yes," Grant said, "they selected eight human beings at random out of the Time they could reach from the present 'position' of their *Now*, and put us all together in that room and pitted us against each other. They watched us kill each other off. They wanted the three of us to fight it out, and if we had, only the winner would be here now. But we wouldn't kill each other, so they compromised and accepted all three of us."

"Siva! Wha' reason?"

"Reason—" Grant said, feeling as a radio receiver must feel, waiting for an answer to come from someone who wanted to tell them why they were there, and why they must die. "I'm not sure it can be put in rational, human terms at all. I don't know whether we could even really

understand their motives. Or want to understand them.

"Maybe they could wipe out all of mankind. Go to Ugh's time and exterminate our ancestors and leave Earth free for their settlement. But even if they were sure they could sneak up and wipe out our ancestors, they wouldn't do it. That's not their way. They'd meet us face to face and fight it out. But that isn't practical—that isn't even sane. Imagine a Time war eight thousand years long." The fantastic horror of the concept swept through his mind. "So," he said slowly, "they decided to pick random samples of mankind, let those random samples choose the fittest by natural selection, and let him be the Champion of Mankind, whether he wanted to be or not.

"Champion," he said slowly, "like in ancient time. Like David and Goliath." He paused and looked at the being beyond the shimmering field of energy. "That's their champion there. If he wins, they'll exterminate mankind."

Yandra looked at Grant with dawning horror in her eyes. Grant laughed and nodded.

"What if you win?" Yandra asked at least, overcoming her fright.

"They'll let us alone," Grant said. "I don't know what they'll do or where they'll go, but they'll let us alone. That's the way they're made."

"How do you know these thin's, David?" Yandra asked suddenly as if the question had just occured to her.

"I don't really know," he said slowly. "Somehow they've told me."

Suddenly he was sweeping Yandra into his arms, holding her against his bare chest, pressing his lips to hers. Yandra gasped at his unexpected violence, yielded.

Then, as suddenly, he pushed her away and turned toward the yellow-gold field of shimmering force.

Within the wall of living light the alien sword hung suspended. The dark-furred people's Champion stood waiting for Grant.

Tentatively the first tendrils of force swept around him as he approached the field. They enfolded his arms and legs, swept around his mouth and hung upon his eyelids. Grant saw that the objective was really simple.

The sword was the objective. Reach the sword first and kill the other. That was all.

The shiny-furred Captor had begun his flowing, feline approach toward the field at the same time as Grant, and from the same distance away.

Grant cast one final glance over his shoulder at Yandra, who stood looking at him with shock and fear and something else he could not identify. at the naked, deaf-mute, stone-filled child who sat silently, blindly on the floor at Yandra's feet, seemingly unaware of the events in which she was involved. Then he turned back to the field—and blundered.

The yellow-gold flickering tendrils of almost-matter that slipped through the air before Grant's eyes were a restraining force. They held him back, replied to each movement of his body with an equal

and opposite force, cancelling him. The closer he came to the sword, the harder he tried to reach for it, the greater the force the field exerted to hold him back. Struggling for ever lengthening moments, feeling the yellow energy-matter twist around him like a cocoon, seeing the seal-like face of the other grow closer and closer, Grant suddenly came to a complete stop.

He stood still, not moving, and watched the tendrils of force release their grip on him. Then he was standing free of them and felt the gentle movement of air against his cheeks. His movements became those of a slow-motion picture, but he knew that he was too late.

His enemy had realized the nature of the field a few seconds sooner — and his dark, alien hand was inches closer to the sword's glimmering hilt.

David Grant watched in horror as the other's straining fingers, their motion barely perceptible, touched the weapon's hilt. He tried to move his own hand a little faster through the tightening yellow fog, only to find an equal force holding him back, his fingers still inches from the sword.

He saw the alien hand grasp the sword, the alien fingers wrap around the hilt. He knew he had lost — he and all of mankind, of all time that has been and shall be.

There was total stillness, no sound, no motion.

Rather than push his advantage, the Captor had come to a halt, his hand still among the golden tendrils. Something had begun to twist the alien, seal-like face. Something brought the thin black lips tight across sharp canine teeth, something made the deep, liquid alien eyes sparkle with an unholy light — and that something was horror.

The Captor knew or heard or felt or sensed something Grant was not aware of, something that filled the alien mind with unacceptable fear. The creature's mouth opened and he screamed. His hand twitched and he staggered backward as if some force were pushing him out of the field, leaving the sword hanging there, four inches from Grant's hand.

"KILL HIM, YOU FOOL!"

Like the cry of an angry god Grant heard the words echo through the room, through the walls of the room and the walls of his mind. But the voice that spoke the words was that of a naked girl child of eight or ten.

Yandra screamed.

The nameless deaf-mute, blind and naked child now stood, alone and aware, her arms hanging loose at her sides. Her hands were clenched in small fists, her eyes awake and burning with fury, her child's face contorted with exertion.

"TAKE THE SWORD," she cried. "KILL HIM! I CANNOT HOLD HIM LONG."

Not stopping to think or question, Grant's hand moved upward through the tendrils of energy, slowly, carefully. And then his fingers closed around the weapon's hilt and he pulled downward.

A connection was broken. The

field vanished. Before him stood the champion of the time travelers, his eyes blazing with the remnants of fear and the beginnings of savage, carnivorous hatred.

"KILL HIM!" the child cried when Grant paused for a brief moment, hardly a beat of his heart, a gasp of breath. "HE WOULD HAVE DONE IT TO YOU!"

A moment later Grant knew that he should not have paused to consider that his enemy was unarmed, he should have known it was neither the time nor the place to be gallant, but by the the time he realized this it was too late.

The dark-furred Captor was in the air, leaping toward him with inhuman swiftness, his short, thick arms outstretched, his hands grasping toward Grant's throat. Grant bounced backward and tried to swing the sword. There was no time; the creature was on him, knocking him off his feet before the swing had begun.

Grant brought his knees up, smashing into the alien's stomach. He tore his right arm free, his numb fingers somehow still holding the sword. There was an unknown strength of desperation in Grant's arms and legs that enabled him to roll, to toss the heavier being from him, to haul himself to his knees and strike out clumsily with the sword.

Warm blood from a cloven skull splattered David Grant.

Struggling to his feet, gasping for breath, Grant looked up to see three armed captors standing before him. Each held a long-barreled weapon.

Grant snatched the bloody sword from what had a moment before had been a living creature. Knowing his chances of killing even one to be slim, Grant was about to throw the weapon toward a dark furry chest when he felt the beginning of a new sensation, a force that brought him and the alien warriors to a stop. He half turned to look at the child.

Her eyes were closed and her face was twisted out of shape. Beads of sweat were forming on her naked body. And it was as if Grant were hearing just the edge of something, like a radio set picking up a station to which it was not tuned because the tremendous power of the transmitting station overrode everything else and forced its way through. And what he heard might have been:

"THIS IS NOT THY WORLD! THOU ARE WARNED! GET THEE HENCE!"

Then the child's eyes opened and she lowered herself to the floor.

She looked at Yandra and then at Grant, and smiled a strange smile full of ancient wisdom.

Then there was darkness. . . .

X

Before he opened his eyes Grant felt the bark of a tree against his back and grass under his naked legs and knew that he was sitting on the ground.

It was warm there. He opened his eyes and saw a clearing in the midst

of a forest, an ancient virgin forest devoid of humanity, in the springtime of somewhere there was not yet Man.

Yandra lay sleeping beside him.

Grant smiled to himself, and wondered. He remembered a dream rising to consciousness from the long, long sleep from which he had just awakened. A dream that was a reality, implanted in his sleeping mind by a child who looked to be eight or ten, a naked child with skin the color of stone, a child who had chosen to go on a "training exercise (?)" into the oh-so-ancient past of her people and help meet/-defend against those who would challenge mankind's right to his time/place.

She was human, Grant knew. The dream told him she was a representative of mankind from beyond the time of Yandra, beyond the world of Krath, a time/place of the distant future far better than anything he had imagined would exist. Somewhere, somewhen — far beyond the near cataclysm of his own age, beyond the sensual-sexual insanity of Yandra's world, beyond the total dictatorship of Krath's time, somewhere beyond — mankind had finally grown out of his childhood. A truly mature society had been born of Earth, a civilization that stretched from Sol's tiny third planet to the limits of the galaxy. In the fading memory of the dream Grant saw a star-sprinkled galaxy of world of men. There was a fleeting glimpse of fairyland buildings and parks, towers of spun glass sparkling under a thousand suns, of men and women, all forever young and beautiful, forever moving toward endless horizons.

Yandra's eyes flickered open and she looked up at Grant and smiled.

"We're still alive," he said after a long, long while of just sitting there listening to a distant bird. He felt the breeze against his naked flesh, smelling the rich loam of the forest, a pleasant, yet almost fetid odor, the smell of the cycle of life and death. "Well, maybe we did win fairly. At least it was close enough to that. Maybe they realized that they hadn't been fair to us — we were the ones who were challenged. Mankind should have had the choice of weapons. But she made her choice anyway."

He paused for a moment and looked up into the endless azure of the arching sky.

"You know," he said, "she was really the champion of mankind. Not me. I was just a weapon."

"Where are we, dag?" Yandra asked, reaching up for him.

Grant shrugged.

"The question is, *when* are we," he said — and stifled Yandra's reply with a kiss. END

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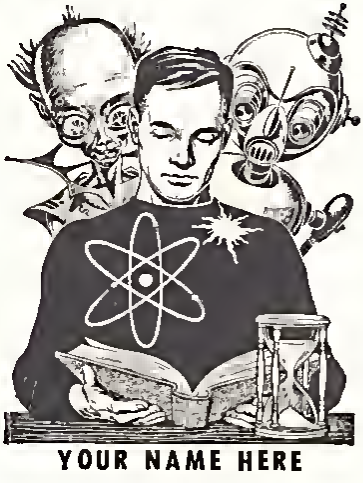

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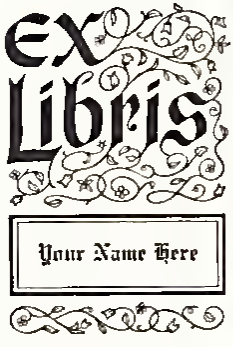

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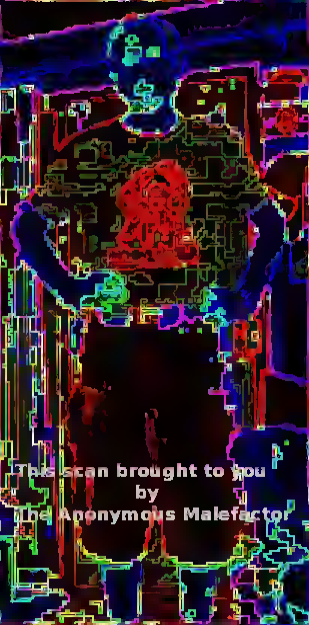
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